OUR BIRDS

RAJESHVAR PRASAD NARAIN SINHA

Foreword by

INDIRA GANDHI

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FOREWORD

I was so glad that Shri Rajeshvar Prasad Narain Sinha has followed Chacha Nehru's advice and brought out a special bird book for children. It fulfils a long-felt need.

Like most Indians I took birds for granted until my father sent me Shri Salim Ali's delightful book from Dehra Dun Jail and opened my eyes to an entirely new world. Only then did I realise how much I had been missing.

Bird-watching is one of the most absorbing and rewarding activities. First, one learns to distinguish the different species, their nesting habits and their calls. Then gradually one realises that birds are also little individuals, each with his own characteristics.

Modern civilisation owes a debt to birds for they have been the models for our own early attempts at flying.

We are fortunate still to be able to live amongst birds even in our cities. In other countries you will have to go deep into the countryside to see any. Let our children learn to recognise them and to be friends with them.

I hope this little book will arouse the interest of children in birds and that they will derive much pleasure from it.

Indira Gandhi

(Indira Gandhi)

ABOUT THIS BOOK

A few months ago the Publications Division brought out a book by me in Hindi on Indian birds entitled "Bharat ke Pakshi". Our beloved leader, Shri Jawaharlal Nehru, was good enough to write a Foreword for it. Since he always has the good of the children of India at heart, he suggested, in the course of the Foreword, that books on Indian birds should be written specially for children in simple language. It is in pursuance of that suggestion that the present book has been written.

More than 23,000 species of birds have been identified in the world. Many thousands of bird species can be seen in our country, and there still remain many varieties to be identified. No book on the birds of India can hope to tell about all of them. This book gives an account of twenty of the most familiar birds—birds which we see and hear every day around us. It is proposed to deal with the rest of the prominent birds of India in similar small books later.

Shrimati Indira Gandhi, whose interest in the welfare of children is well known, has taken the trouble of contributing a Foreword for this book. I am immensely grateful to her.

RAJESHVAR PRASAD NARAIN SINHA

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THE KOEL

Who has not heard the Koel, the most musical of our birds ? Children and elders love it alike and our poets have sung its praise. But though the Koel is a master-singer it is not at all pretty to look at. This contrast between its voice and its looks has been mentioned in proverb and poetry. A Hindi saint, Giridhardas, has said : "Take the crow and the Koel. They are of the same complexion, but the Koel is liked by all and the crow is hated. This shows that none is valued who has no virtues in him ; but one who has them has hundreds of admirers." The Koel has thus become a symbol of worth.

The Koel is a bird of spring. It is first heard when the trees are laden with new leaves and buds. It must have been on such an occassion that the eminent English poet, Rudyard Kipling, wrote :

> Oh Koel, little Koel, singing on the *Siris* bough,
> Can you tell me aught of England, or of spring in England now ?

All through spring it keeps singing day and night, much to the thrill of children. Its song continues in summer, but with the coming of winter the Koel grows silent. It does not like the cold weather, and in winter it migrates to the southern parts of our country which are warmer. Some Koels stay back but are soldom seen or heard in winter.

If everybody has heard the Koel, how many have seen it? Many of you have gazed for hours at trees trying to find out where the bird whose voice you hear sits. That is why the Koel has been called a shy bird. In this respect it is like its European cousin, the fleeting cuckoo, of which poet Wordsworth wrote:

O Cuckoo! Shall I call thee a bird,
Or but a wandering voice?

The only time you can see a Koel is when it flies from one tree to another. You will then notice that it is very much like the crow, of the same colour and size, but slenderer and with a longer tail.

In appearance, male and female are not similar, The male is of a glistening black colour. Its bill is yellowish green and the eyes are crimson. The female is brown, with white spots over the head. Its back and wings and tail are barred with white. The young Koel has a black bill and grey eyes, and the colours change with age. It is the male that sings *kuoo-kuoo-kuoo,* and not the female which only utters a sharp click that sounds *kik-kik-kik* while flying from one tree to another. The Koel can be caught and reared in cages. At spring time the caged birds sing with the same vigour and gusto as a bird which is free. The Koel's food consists of berries, insects and caterpillars.

The Koel is found all over India, but not in the hills. There are two prominent varieties of it: one is found in Burma and Assam and the other inhabits the rest of India and Ceylon.

Just because the Koel has been praised for its voice, do not think it is virtuous in every way. It is a lazy bird. The mother Koel does not bring up its children. Like lazy people, the Koel is clever.

It is cleverer than the crow, which is known for its cunning. In fact, it makes use of the crow to bring up its children. The Koel does not build a nest of its own, but lays its eggs in the nest of the crow. The colour of the eggs of both the Koel and the crow is the same, a pale greyish green with brown specks. They have both the same, laying season, between April and August. So the Koel lays its eggs, which may number up to ten at a time, and the mother crow sits on them without suspecting they are somebody else's. How does the Koel manage to do it when the crow is so cautious a creature ? This is how the male and female Koel play their game. When the time comes for the female to lay its eggs, the male Koel finds out a tree on which a crow has built its nest. It then sits near the nest and sings. The crows grow furious and attack the intruder. The Koel flies off, and the crows follow it. Meanwhile the female Koel which has been waiting for the chance gets into the nest and lays eggs. Having done this, she gives a cry by which the male comes to know that the plan has worked. The Koel is able to fly faster than the crow. So the male quickens the pace and is soon out of the reach of the crows. The female also takes off. The crows return to their nest and recommence hatching, ignorant of what has happened in the nest in the meantime. The female Koel does not rest content with being a bad guest; it often pushes away the crow's eggs before placing her own in the nest. It often happens that more Koels than one lay in the same nest.

The Koel's eggs are hatched by the crows and at the proper time the chicks come out They are tended with care by the foster-parents, and they often receive greater love than the crow's own chicks, because they are better looking, But one fine morning the parents find the nest empty. The little ones have flown away, without bothering to bid them good-bye. A birdwatcher has noted down that he once saw three chicks of a crow in a nest along with two of the Koel. When he went to see them again after a week, he found that the crow's chicks had gone and the Koel chicks were having a good time in the nest. Obviously, the rivals had been put out of the way.

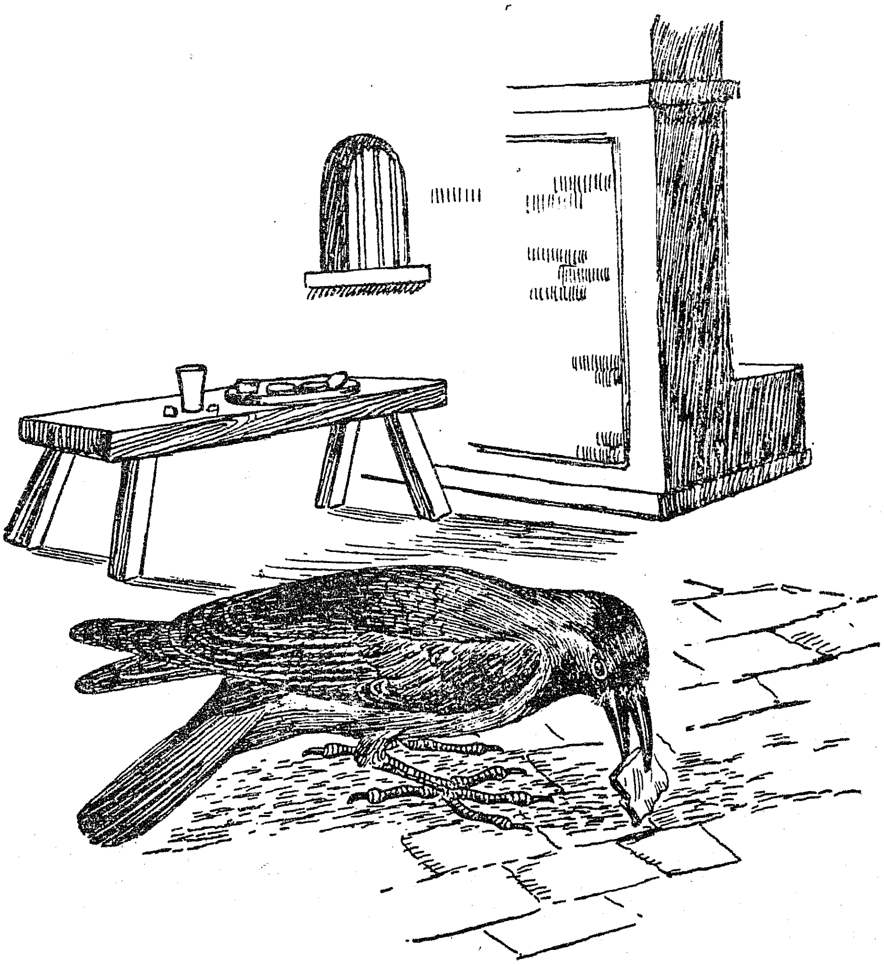
Sometimes the female Koel, having laid her eggs in the erow's nest, continues sitting for weeks on some nearby tree, watching how the young ones are growing up. And when the chicks are in a position to fly, she quietly escorts them away to a distant tree.

The fact that the Koel cheats the poor crow has been long known to our people. The Koel has earned a bad name because of this. It is often ealled a parasite, or one who lives on others although not everybody has direct evidence of the Koel's ways. But a few months ago I found a Koel sitting on a tree in my house in Delhi. It sat for hours and days together and I wondered why she was so fond of that particular tree. The mystery was soon solved. One day, as I was going out of the house, a Koel chick fell from a tree in front of me and when I looked up I found a crow's nest at the top of the tree. Soon the crows raised a cry; and you know how noisy the crows can be. They were evidently upset over the incident.

That reminded me of a story I had read.

There was once a king called Bodhista who had a loose tongue. He had a minister named Subodha who was famous for his wisdom. While they were strolling in the palace garden a Koel chick fell down from a tree. It had wounds all over its body. The king was greatly pained and asked Subodha why the chick had been so badly treated by its parents. The minister, who wished the king would learn the virtue of not wasting his words, replied, "Your Majesty ! This is a chick of a Koel which was reared by a couple of crows. They were unaware of the fact, because its mother had laid the eggs in the nest very cunningly, as Koels always do. Now, this chick was in the habit of talking too much and at all times. The crows, seeing that its voice was not that of their race, suspected that it was an intruder and threw it out of the nest. It has thus been punished for its own folly in talking too much. If it had kept mute, nothing would have happened and it would have lived happily under their care till it was in a position to fly."

The king at once took the hint and gave up the habit of talking too much. Needless to say, he benefited by it.



THE CROW

The crow is found everywhere in India except two places, Kodaikanal in the south and Chitrakoot in the north. It is easily the most common of our birds. It always hovers around our houses and often tries to sneak into the rooms. Its caw is heard early in the morning, and it disturbs old people's sleep in the afternoon. It is active and alert the whole day, waiting for us to turn our back so that it can steal something or other to eat. Mothers are careful to see that

crows do not peep into the kitchen. Crows have no rules about their food. They will eat anything. Boys who catch mice in traps know how the crows hop behind them when they try to release the mice. Their readiness to finish off dirty and decaying things has earned them the name of scavengers.

These are the House Crows. They live in trees that line the larger roads and in gardens and orchards near the towns, spending the night in their nest and the day in their normal haunts. But the Jungle Crows are a little different. They do not live in flocks, or visit our house everyday. But their caw is more jarring to the ear than that of House Crows.

The House Crow is smaller in size than its jungle cousin. It is about 43 cms in length, and has a round wide patch of grey colour beginning from the neck and coming down to breast. The rest of the body is black. Male and female are alike.

The nesting season is from April to June. The nest is in the shape of a high platform on tree-tops. In building it the crow uses all sorts of things picked up wherever they are found—twigs, wires, pieces of cloth, coir fibre and so on. In Bombay a crow's nest was once found to contain the frame of a pair of gold spectacles worth some four hundred rupees ! Incubation of the egg is shared by both the male and the female, unlike most other birds where the mother alone does this work. There are usually four or five eggs in a clutch.

The Jungle Crow is bigger in size. It has a jet black complexion and a heavy bill. It likes the countryside, but visits villages and towns now and then. There is an age-old belief in many parts of our country that if a Jungle Crow sits on any house and caws repeated, it is a sign that guests are to be expected in that house. In grandmothers' tales the crow is always described as knowing about events before we come to know of them. Whether it is so I cannot say. But since some birds and beasts have keener sight, smell and hearing than human beings, it is possible they can sense some things that we

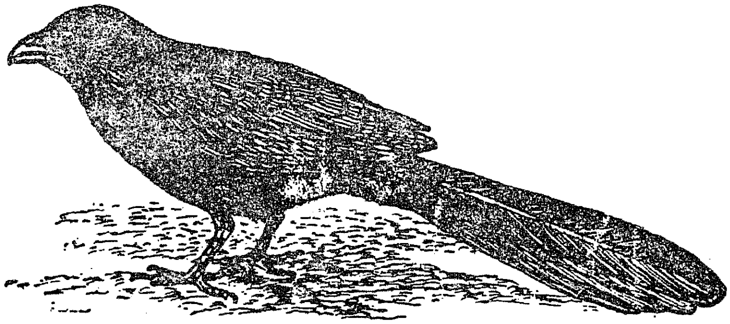
cannot. In 1934, a violent earthquake shook Bihar and caused terrible destrucsion. It was a bright sunny day in January and there was no hint that any such disaster would occur. The flowers were in full bloom and the gardens were a pleasant look. Suddenly hundreds and hundreds of crows started yelling in a deep and hoarse tone. They flew about aimlessly and in fear. I was wondering what had happened to them, when, within ten minutes, the earth shook violently, houses collapsed and many people were killed.

I said the crow is a thief. It is also a robber. It raids other birds' nests and eats up their eggs and chicks. The crow, therefore does not get along with other birds. In fact, it is the bird that is hated most by other birds. They do not allow it to go near their nest. It so happened once that I was sitting in the verandah of my house when suddenly a crow appeared near the nest of a pair of Bulbuls. Bulbuls, as you know, are much smaller in size than the crow. Still they immediately fell upon it. The crow like all bullies is a coward. It fled. The Bulbuls pursued it up to the gate of the compound and returned only when it had gone out of sight. To see a crow fly is not as lovely as to see a pigeon fly. But the crow is supposed to fly straight. That is why we say 'as the crow flies' when we refer to the nearest distance between two places.

Though we are not very fond of crows, crows seem to have a sort of attachment for us. It has been noticed that their number in any town or city depends on the number of people in the place. It has also been seen that when left alone they come very close to babies and play pranks with them. And babies, in turn, seem to like the way crows hope about or bend their necks. One of the first words that young children learn to speak is the name of the crow.

Like parrots, the common crows live in large groups. They build their nest also in company. When a violent storm hit Calcutta a few years ago, many lakhs of crows died on the Maidan alone. Obviously they all had their nests on the trees in the vast open space. Crows not only live as a community but have some rules which

every member of the group has to obey. You have all seen how, when one crow is hurt, a good many other crows immediately collect around it. If you keep watch, you may also see a crow being punished. It is almost like a court scene. Several crows collect in a field. They all seem to discuss something. Then most of the crows fly away and only the 'culprit' and a few other crows remain. They punish the guilty crowby pecking him with their beaks. But when it is a question of fighting an out-sider, the crows team up and offer a united front.



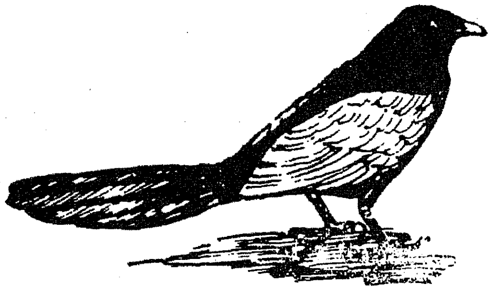
THE CROW PHEASANT

The Crow Pheasant is not a crow but is of the cuckoo family, like our Koel and Papiha. It is a singing bird, though its song is not as sweet as the Koel's. The Crow Pheasant, which is also called coucal, is different from the Koel in habits. It does not make use of other birds' nests. It builds its own nest and rears its chicks with care and affection.

In size it is the same as a Jungle Crow, with a broad and long tail. The wings are reddish brown. The rest of the body, including the tail and beak, is glossy black. Crow Pheasants are seen in pairs or singly, and the male and female look alike. Unlike the Koel, the Crow Pheasant spends most of its time on ground, amidst bushes, in search of insects. It also eats lizards, young mice, bird's eggs and nestlings.

Crow Pheasants are very early risers. At dawn one of them starts uttering a deep, resonant sound which is something like ***coop-coop-coop*** and it is soon joined in a duet by another Crow Pheasant. In a few minutes the call is heard all over the area, particularly from bamboogroves, where these birds usually roost during nights.

The nesting season is from February to September. The nests, built in shrubs of moderate height, are not tidy. They consist of a roundish mass of leaves and twigs. The eggs are of chalky white colour. Father and mother take turns in incubation duties. When a Crow Pheasant is sitting in the nest it can be easily recognised by its long tail which juts out of the nest.



THE BLACK DRONGO

(*KING CROW*)

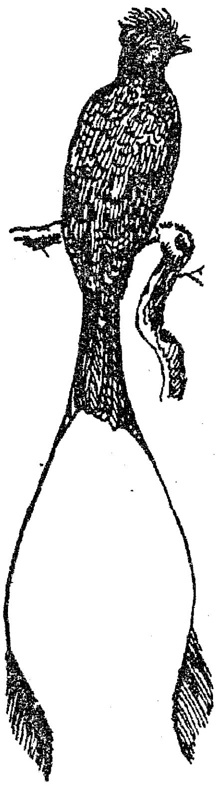
The Black Drongo, which is also called King Crow, because of its black colour, is a bold creature. It is not afraid of other birds, however big, and fights them with great courage. It has been seen attacking crows, even though it is much smaller than the crow. You can say that the Black Drongo has a lion's heart in a bird's body. It does not allow any bird to go near its nest. It even guards the nest of other birds near its own house. For this reason the bird is called Kotwal, meaning 'watchman.' Many birds, especially the oriole, choose to build their nests on the same tree as the Black Drongo. This has given birth to the Hindi saying—'Together live on the trees orioles and King Crows'.

The Black Drongo is a slim, agile bird. It is glossy black in colour. Its long, forked tail has ten feathers and often there is a white patch at the end of the tail. Male and female look alike.

Though a brave fighter, it is also a good singer. Its voice is sweet and musical. It starts singing at day-break. Villagers of North India have, therefore, given it another name, Thakurjee, or singer of devotional songs.

The food of this bird consists mainly of insects. It is a bird of the open country, and is usually perched on telegraph wires or other places from where it can keep a look-out for grasshoppers and other insects. As soon as it sights them, it pounces on them with lightning speed. It is very fond of riding on the backs of grazing cattle, and watching for insects disturbed by the animals' movement through the grass. Just as it is a companion of cattle, the bird is also a friend of the farmer. It eats up many insects which otherwise would have

harmed the crops. Another food which the bird is fond of is flower nectar.



The Racket-tailed Drongo

Its nesting season begins in April and lasts till August. The nest is cupshaped, and has a neat look about it. The eggs are white, with brownish red spots. Home duties are shared by both father and mother. But during the nesting season, the Black Drongo becomes short-tempered and picks up quarrels with other birds.

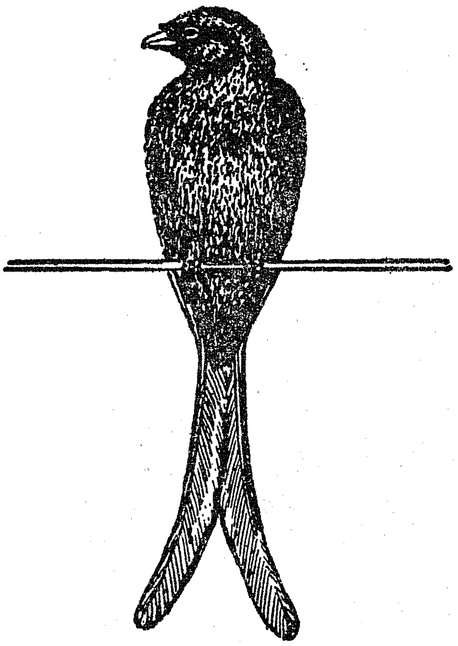
There is another bird closely related to the Black Drongo family which is called the white-bellied Drongo. It is found in Kutch, Garhwal, Bihar and West Bengal. As its name suggests its belly is white and the rest of the body is of a shining indigo colour. Yet another bird of the same group is the Racket-tailed Drongo. Called Bhimraj in Hindi, it is like the Black Drongo in colour and is larger in size. It has a tuft on its forehead and two long tails of the shape of a tennis racket.

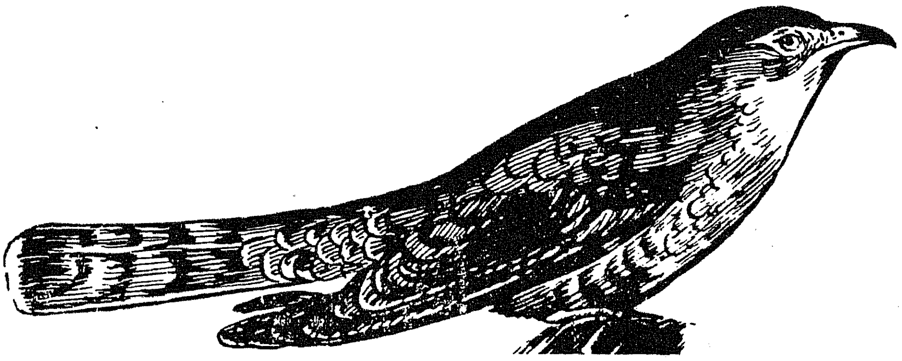
The Racket-tailed Drongo is a very clever bird. It has a very sweet voice, and what is more, it is a wonderful mimic. It can copy the call of many other birds. It can even imitate the voice of animal. It has a naughty mind and takes delight in frightening other birds by its pranks. Many times it causes panic among the smaller animals by imitating the voice of large jungle beasts. Even hunters have been fooled by it.

Nearly eight kinds of the bird are found in our country. It likes to live in teak and bamboo forests. It keeps company with the Jungle Babblers and other such birds. It eats insects and moths, and has a taste for flower-nectar.

But it is the tail by which the bird has become famous. The feathers are so pretty that people of the hills often wear them on the head. The Racket-tailed Drongo can be brought up in cages also. Only the cage should be large, and the bird should be given a large dinner of insects regularly.

The Black Drongo





THE HAWK-CUCKOO

The Hawk-Cuckoo or Papiha ranks next only to the Koel in the list of our singing birds. Like the Koel it begins singing in the spring, but keeps up its song even in the rainy season. In fact, the sight of dark clouds in the sky works as a tonic on the Hawk-Cuckoo and makes it sing with greater vigour and feeling. If you ever hear the cry or *'Piu-Piu'* or *Pipiho* filling the air around you, you may take it that the Hawk-Cuckoo is pouring out its song. The coming of winter, however, sends the bird into silence.

But when it sings, the Hawk-Cuckoo never seems to be tired of its song. The notes follow one another in the same manner, making us wonder whether the song would ever stop. That is why the Englishmen gave the Papiha the name 'Brain-fever Bird."

In looks, it is very similar to the Shikara or smaller hawk. Hence the name Hawk-Cuckoo. In flight and movement also, the two birds are alike. But how different in nature! The Papiha is the size of a pigeon, but has a longer tail and slenderer body. Its back and head are grey. The belly is of a lighter colour, with brown-coloured hair all over. The middle portion of its tail has a number of white and black strips. The eyes and feet are yellowish, and the bill is greenish yellow. The Papiha lives on fruits, berries and insects. It swallows poisonous hairy insects which other birds avoid. Thus other's poison is its meat.

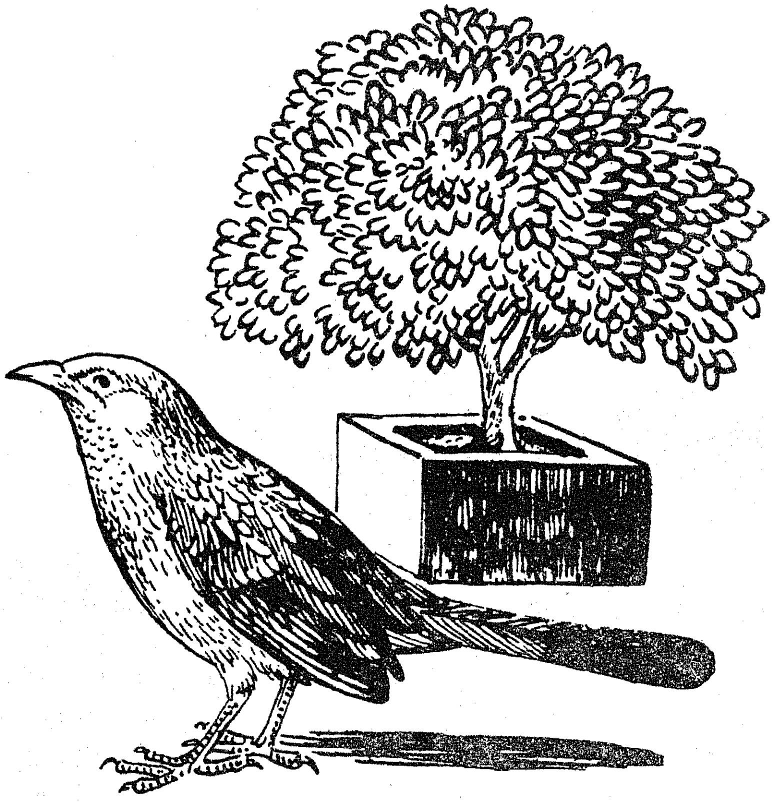
It is found all over India but is rarely seen beyond Rajasthan. Like the Koels, many Papihas migrate to South India during the cold season.

There is a black variety of this cuckoo which is commonly known in this country as Chatak. The English name is Pied Crested Cuckoo. It is a pretty-looking bird, with a black back and a white belly. The wing-ends have white, round patches which can be seen clearly when it flies. The black crest on its head adds to its prettiness. Like the hawk, it has small white feathers on the legs.

The Chatak sings not in spring, as does the Hawk-Cuckoo, but with the coming of the rainy season. It utters the same sound as the Papiha, *piu-piu* or *pipiho* but in a gentler and sweeter tone. Crested Cuckoos migrate to Africa during winter, only to return to our country with the rains. The first sight of the Chatak is an indication that the rains are near at hand. Indeed, 'waiting like with the Chatak for rains' is a common Sanskrit comparison.

Cuckoos of both these varieties are parasific in habit. They do not lay eggs in their own nest, because they never build one, but in the nests of other birds, particulary the Jungle Babblers, who act as foster-parents to their chicks. The eggs of the Cuckoos and the Babblers are blue in colours and they have the same nesting season. The Babblers are simple-minded. The Papihas do not have to employ any special tricks to lay their eggs in the Babblers' nests, as the Koels have to when they lay in crows' nests. The female Papiha goes straight into the nest of the Babbler and lays. At times, it even eats up the eggs of its hosts. The Babblers do not even find this out. Often during autumn the young chicks of the Cuckoos are noticed roaming about with their foster-parents. But they disappear when they are strong enough, and the Babblers go about searching for them. But the Papihas sit far above the ground, on some tall tree, calling: 'O ! my love! My love! (*Pipiho-Pipiho*)

The Pied Crested Cuckoo or Chatak

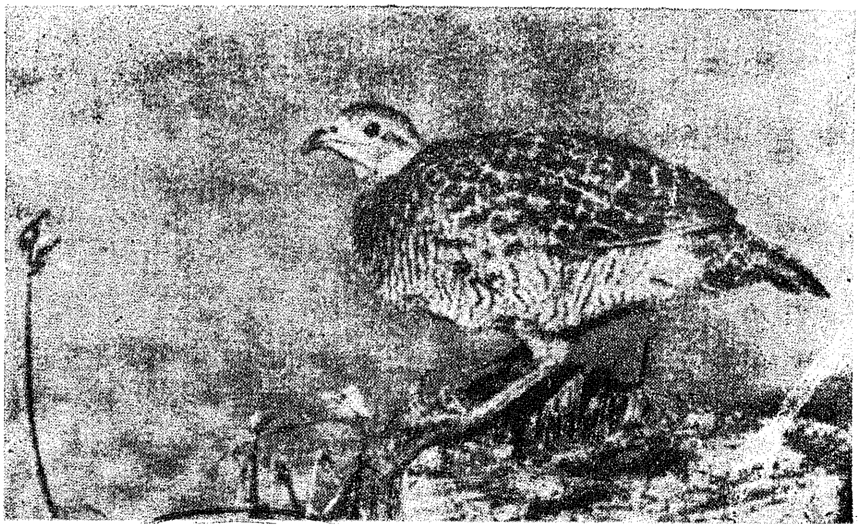


THE JUNGLE BABBLERS

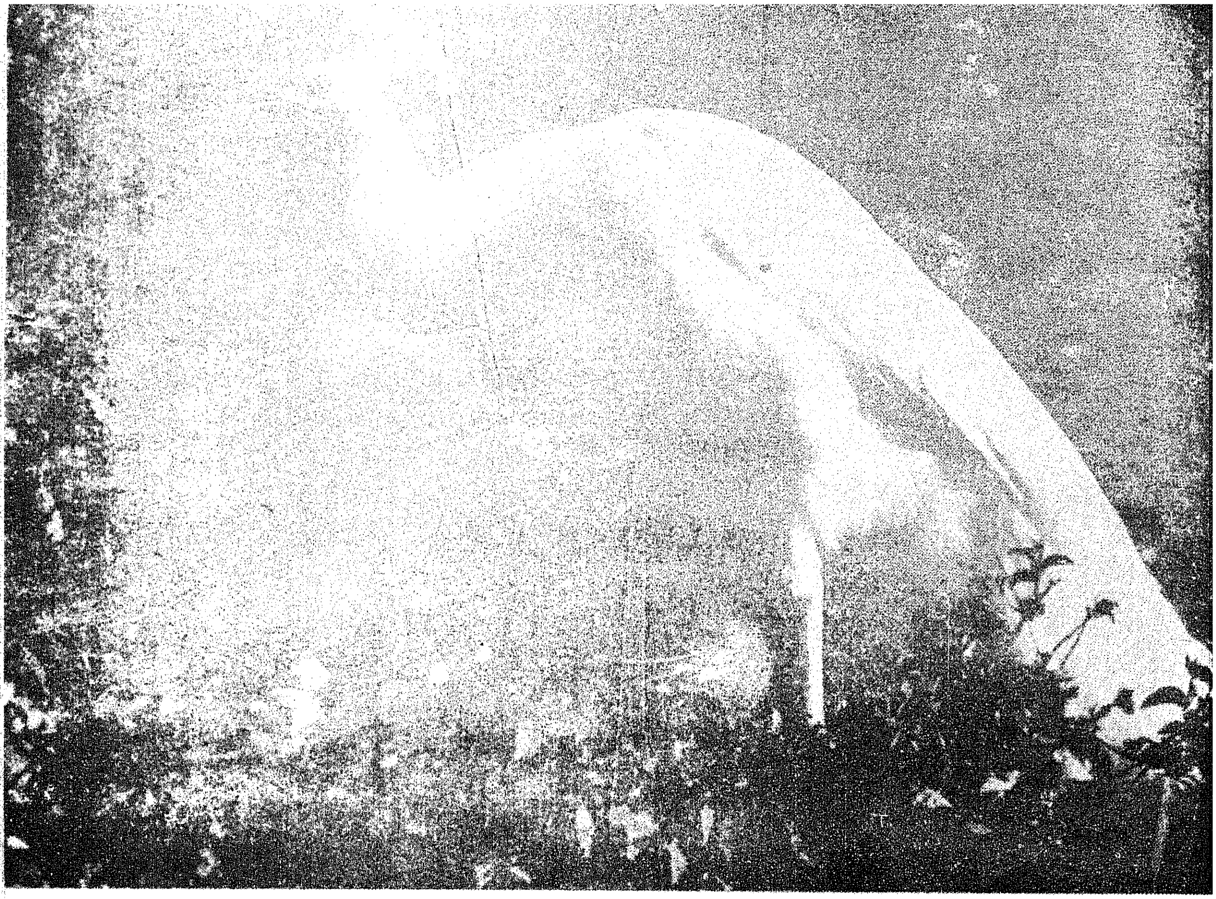
(SEVEN SISTERS)

Often around the plants in our courtyard or amidst shrubs in front of our house we notice a number of earth-brown birds hopping about in groups in search of insects. These birds, which are untidy to look at, are the Jungle Babblers. Because they are usually found in groups of six or seven at a time, they have been given the name "Seven Sisters" (Sat Bahani in Hindi). They are so funny-looking that once a newly-arrived Viceroy of India, who had gone to see the Taj Mahal at Agra, asked questions about them rather than about the famous monument.

Male Partridge

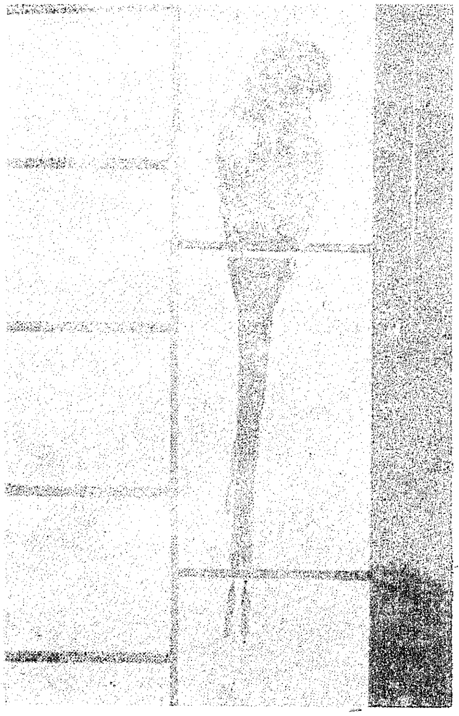


At a Partridge-Fight



White Peacock

A young Peacock



Pet Parrot

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A boy with his feathered friends

Owls on perch

The Jungle Babblers are about 25 cm. in length. They have a longish tail which seems on the point of coming out any moment. This gives them a loose and unkempt appearance. Their underparts are of a yellowish ashy colour. The eyelids are white with a touch of yellow. The bill and the feet have the colour of an onion.

But you should not judge birds merely by their looks. The Jungle Babblers have a number of good qualities. Foremost among them is their team spirit. They fight amongst themselves, no doubt, but when they have to face an outsider, they drop their quarrels and band themselves together. Even large birds, like hawks or crows, have no chance against the Jungle Babblers because they present a solid front. You should see a Jungle Babbler when it is excited. Its feathers are ruffled, and what a chatter it makes!

The Babblers can easily be spotted in shrubs and gardens by the peculiar way they hop about. They are like a group of workers talking among themselves, now jerking their neck and now turning around. They chatter even during the nights, giving out a loud group chant every four hours. Why they do so is unknown, but some say it is to keep off enemies.

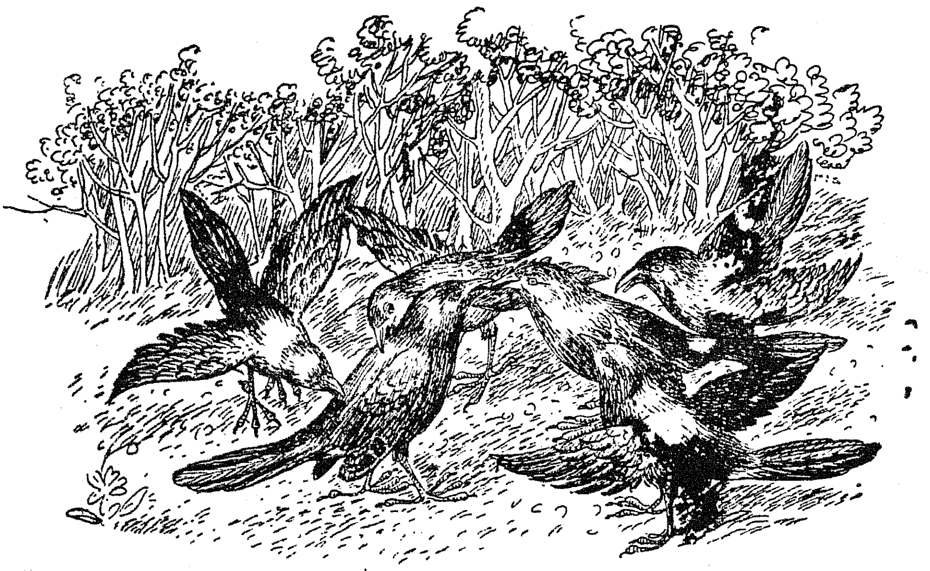
Their sense of unity is so strong that they do all their work jointly. During the whole day they hunt for food in a team. Even hatching of eggs and rearing of fledglings is done in groups. A bird-watcher once noticed seven Babblers feeding the chicks of a particular mother by turns. They often clean one another's feathers with their bills. No other birds have been seen to do so.

They never let down a comrade. If ever any member of the flock is left behind, the rest will halt their journey and wait for it to rejoin them, chattering all the time to show where they are. If you wish to see their group feeling, put a Jungle Babbler in a cage: the rest of the group will surround the cage and try to get inside.

Another of their vitues is courage. Although small in size, they are very brave. They are not afraid of even a hawk or a falcon, and put up a bold fight. Many times they even rescue their kin from the clutches of a hawk by attacking it.

Jungle Babblers eat spiders and other insects, also berries and figs, grain and flower-nectar. They rarely fly high. They build their nests on leafy branches of trees, not more than three metres from the ground. They lay three or four eggs at a time, and the eggs are bright blue in colour.

There are many varieties of Jungle Babblers in our country. Those found in South India are larger in size than those of the North.



THE BULBUL

"The Bulbul, which did chase the bejewelled Butterflies—" wrote an English poet, describing what is one of the loveliest sights in our gardens. No garden in India is complete without Bulbuls. They lend life to our gardens by flying from one branch to another and letting their sweet notes float in the air. The Bulbul is never at one place for long. It is always on the move, as if having a word or two with every flower that blooms in the garden.

The song of the Bulbul has been praised in many poems, but it is said that it is only the Persian Bulbul that sings, not the Indian. The Persian Bulbul has been called "Hazardastan" (of thousand tunes) and is a master singer; but our own Bulbul, too, sitting on tree-top at dusk, utters a note that is full of sweetness and pathos. Its evening call is something like a farewell song, very different from the joyous note it utters during the day.

The Persian variety of Bulbul is found only in Kashmir in our country. It is said that Nurjehan, wife of Emperor Jahangir, who was fond of Kashmir, imported some Bulbuls from Persia and let them free there. They have been found there ever since.

The Indian Bulbul is of many varieties. The most common is the Guldum Red-vented Bulbul. It is 23 cms. in length, and its crest, neck and tail are black. The rest of the body is smoke-brown. There are marks like scales on the breast and back and a prominent crimson patch at the root of the tail. The rump is of white colour.

Then there is the red-whiskered Bulbul which is commonly known as Sipahi Bulbul because its red whiskers are like those worn by

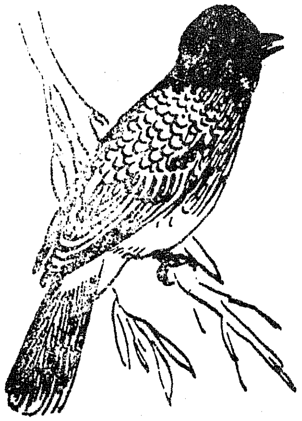
hand, saw the crow and at once flew over and attacked it. The crow fled, but the Bulbuls gave it a good chase.

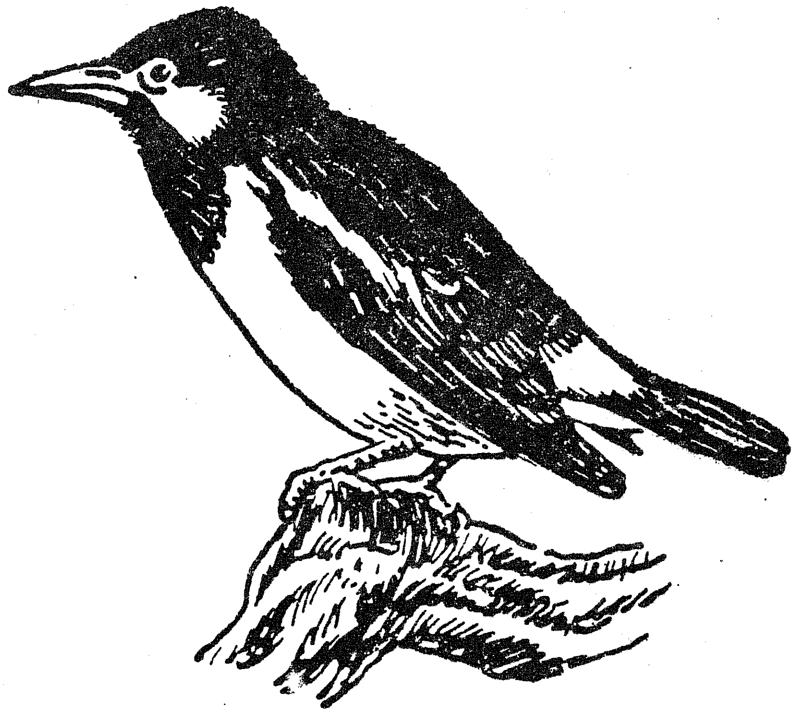
I have already said a word about how Bulbuls love to quarrel. Now about their other weakness. They are greedy eaters and a danger to the fruits in our orchards and the crops in our fields. At times Bulbuls have been seen to destroy whole gardens and fields. There is a nursery rhyme in Bengali in which a farmer complains that Bulbuls have ruined his paddy field and wonders how he is to find money to pay his rent to the Government.

At the same time, they do some good also to the farmers by devouring the harmful insects. A bird doctor once examined the contents of the stomach of a Bulbul and found in it 300 insects of all sizes. Some of them were very poisonous.

But we like the good in the Bulbuls and forget the bad. We love Bulbuls because they are an ornament to our gardens. And many of you have heard the song sung by one of our greatest poets, Iqbal :

Better than the whole World is this Hindustan of ours.
We are its Bulbuls, and this is the garden of us all !





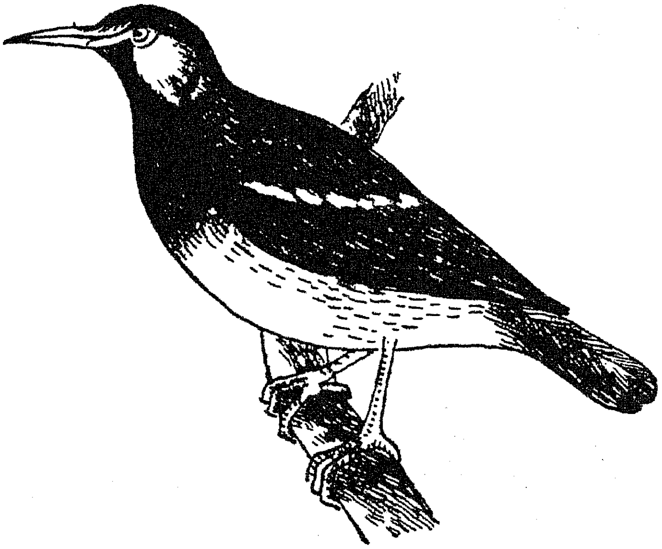
THE MYNA

The Myna, which is next only to the parrot as a pet for the cage, may be called the most Indian of all birds. Even though it is found in some other countries of Asia, the Indian Myna excels the other varieties.

The most common of the many kinds of Myna in our country is the Desi Myna. About 28 cms. in length, it is dark brown in colour, with bright yellow bill and legs. The colour around the eyes is also yellow. It has a large white patch on the inside of its flight-feathers, which is clearly seen when the bird flies. Its nesting seasons falls between the months of April and August and it lays four or five blue eggs twice during the period. Any place is good enough for the Myna to build its nest, which is a rather ugly pad of twigs, root and paper bits. Very often it moves into the empty nests of other birds

Sometimes you can open an old almirah or unused letter-box and find a Myna family making its home there.

The Desi Myna is as bold as the crow, but is certainly more likable. As one writer has said, Mynas make themselves entirely at home in a house, taking it completely for granted that they are quite at liberty to drop in and stay whenever and for as long as they like.



Another variety of Myna is the Bank Myna. It is also called River or Ganga Myna because it nests on river-banks. It is like the Desi Myna in shape but differs in colour. The Bank Myna is slaty grey rather than brown, and the skin around the eye is brickred and not yellow. The wing patch and tail tips are pinkish instead of white.

Another difference is that the Bank Myna lives in flocks. A large number of Myna homes are built side by side on cliffs on river-banks and the nests have an inner tunnel connecting one another. It certainly must be easy for Bank Mynas to pay visits to friends and relations.

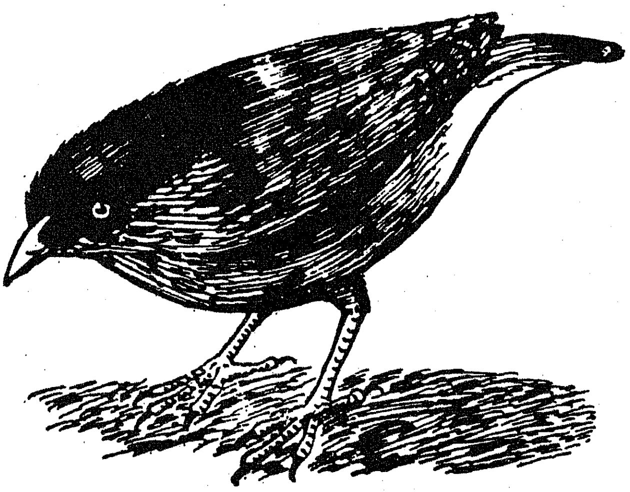
Althoug often found in market-places and railway platforms, the Bank Myna likes to live in the open-country, away from human beings. The Desi Myna, on the contrary, likes to live where human beings live.

Third in the Myna list is the Rosy Myna. It has a rose-coloured body, although the head, breast, wings and tail are black. It is a migrating bird that comes to us in winter and harms field crops like

jowar. But it also helps the peasant by killing locusts. It is fond of figs, berries and flower-nectar.

The Pied Myna is the fourth kind of Myna you can see. Its head and neck are black, but it has a white patch from the base of the beak through the eye backwards. The back, wings and tail are blackishbrown, and the entire lower plumage is grey.

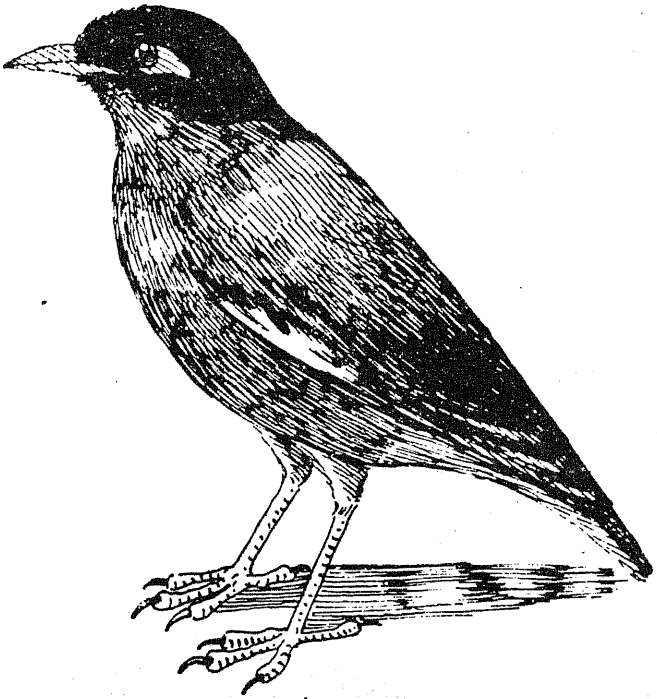
Then there is Jungle Myna which is also known as Hill Myna. It is a jet-black bird with a large white patch at the base of the outer feathers. The bill and legs are yellow. Above the nostrils there is an erect tuft of feathers which sets it apart from all other races of Myna. It lives in forests, chiefly on hill ranges, and feeds on wild figs. It is a skilful mimic and for that reason it is much in demand as a cage-bird. It is as good a talker as the parrot, and it imitates the human voice



very well. When caged, it is fed on flour pellets mixed with small pieces of boiled meat and onions. But great care has to be taken of it because it easily catches disease, including a kind of sore in the tongue. Unless treated at once, the bird might die.

We should also take note of the Brahminy Myna. Smaller in size, it is popular with bird-lovers because it sings well. It is a fine

mimic and learns the song of other birds. The Brahminy Myna has a bushy head which is deep black in colour. Its crest hanging loose, looks like the mane of a lion. The wing-feathers are also black. The neck. and the lower plumage are buff-coloured Only the thighs and a patch under the tail are white. The remaining upper plumage is deep brown.



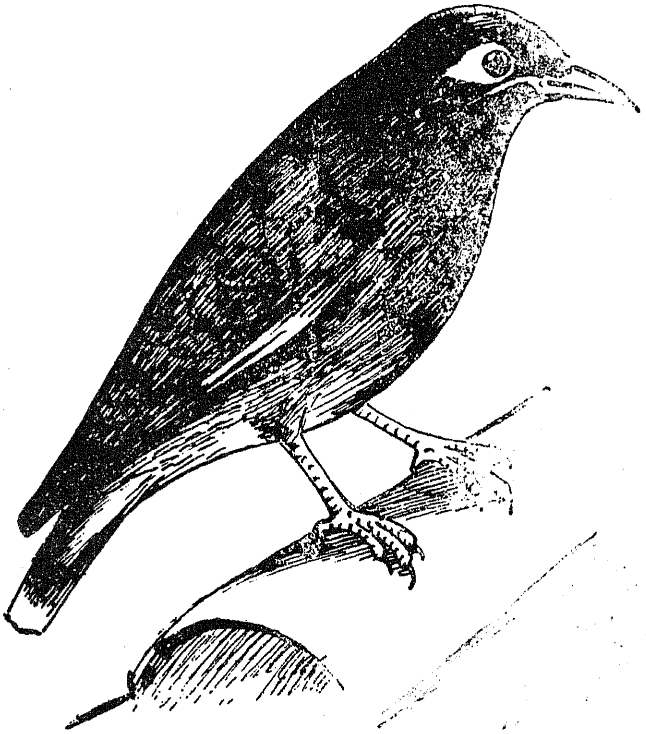
The legs are bright yellow. It is a lovely bird and its notes are as sweet as those of the Shama. It is known by the name Pawai in North India. It sings well even when caged.

This variety is usually found in pairs and nests in the holes of trees. The breeding season is between May and August.

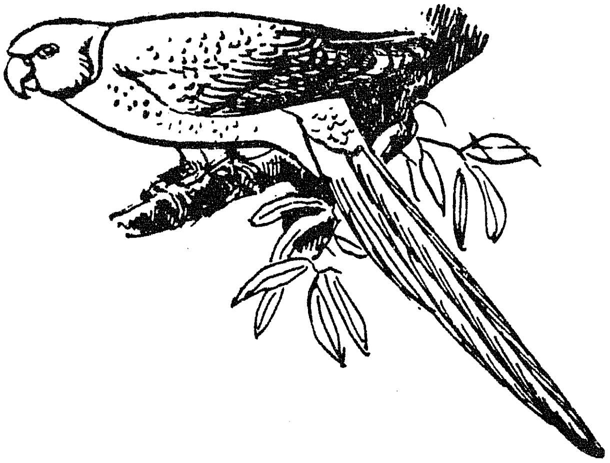
Mynas, like Jungle Babblers, show wonderful unity in the face of danger. When larger birds plan to attack them they collect together and raise hue and cry. The presence of snakes is sometimes noted by the noise made by Mynas. In the evenings they gather together on trees or telegraph wires and keep talking loudly. They become silent only at nightfall, but they wake up and chatter in chorus even during darkness.

The Myna eats house scraps, fruits, berries grain, insects like earthworms, grasshoppers, crickets and caterpillars, and even the meat of dead animals. But there are some varieties, like the Pawai Myna, which prefer fruit and grain.

Though the Myna helps the farmer to some extent by killing insects, the harm it does by eating up the crops is greater than the good. Some years ago, South Africa, Mauritius and New Zealand found that there were too many insects harming their farms. Therefore they imported thousands of Mynas from our country and let them loose. The insects were destroyed, no doubt, but the Mynas have grown to be so many in number that they are themselves a danger to the crops. The people of these countries are sorry that they ever invited them to their land.



THE PARROT



Among the cagebirds of our country none can beat the parrot in popularity. There was a time when every house, in town or village, had a parrot. Kings and the common people liked it equally well, and parrots lived in palaces as well as poor people's huts. The tales that grand mothers tell us are full of princesses who own parrots. In the drawing class, how you love to draw and paint parrots!

Why are parrots so popular? For one thing they are pretty, with their green coat and red beak. For another, they are able to mimic the human voice and repeat what we teach them. You have all heard the phrase "to speak like a parrot." We use it when we refer to people who say things without understanding the meaning. Do you remember the story of the good parrot and the bad parrot? The bad parrot, which had been brought up by a wicked man, had learnt only words of abuse and swore at passers-by. The good parrot had been taught good words and it spoke most politely to travellers.

More than a thousand years ago, there was a great scholar in Mithila called Mandan Misra. He was so famous that scholars from all over the country went to his house to argue with him. The great Shankaracharya was one of them. It is said that Mandan Misra had a parrot which had heard so many of these learned discourses that it amazed newcomers by reeling off any number of *sloka*s and *sutras*.

But it is a curious fact that even though a parrot may live in a cage for years, it does not grow fond of cage-life. The moment it is let off, it flies away to some tree and never casts a lingering look back at its master. Other cage-birds, if they come out of the cage, keep hovering around it for some time; not so the parrot.

In Zoos you would have seen parrots of many kinds and colours, the common green parrots, white parrots, grey and black parrots and blue and red prrrots. In fact, there are some 160 races of parrots in the world. Some of them are also called parakeets and cockatoos. But only four varieties are common in our country.

The most common race, that which comes to your garden to have a bite at the ripening guava, is the Rose-ringed Parakeet. It flies straight and swiftly like an arrow. You all know that it has a long and slim tail, grass-green plumage and a short, hooked, red bill. But have you noticed the fine black line that run from its nostril to the eye ? And do you know how to tell the male from the female ? The male has a collar round its neck which is red on top and black at the chin. The female has only a green-coloured ring round its neck. It is the rose-ringed variety which is commonly tamed and taught to talk.

Another popular kind of parrot is the Blossom-headed Parakeet. It is called Lalthia or Lalsira in Hindi. It has a bluish red head, orange-coloured bill, bluish neck and a maroon patch near the bend of the wing. The upper plumage is yellowish green. The female lacks the deep red patch on the shoulder but has a bright yellow ring round the neck. The feathers of the wing are pink and green in colour. The two long middle tail feathers are bluish and have white tips. Its call is more pleasing than the harsh, screaming notes of the Rose-ringed Parakeet. It flies faster than other Indian parrots.

The third race is the Alexandrine Parakeet which is also called the Large Indian Parakeet because it is bigger in size than the other Indian parrots. This is the famous Hiraaman Tota of the legends and is found everywhere in India. It is about 48 cms. in length while the Rose-ringed Parakeet is only 38 cms. Also, the Alexandrine Parakeet has a red patch on each shoulder. It flies and roost in flocks. Those of you who live in Delhi or have visited the city must have seen hundreds and thousands of them flying over Delhi on their way to their roosting places. They are less clever than the smaller parrots in learning to talk.

Then there is the small Lorikeet, a pretty little grass-green parrot. It is the size of a house sparrow and has a crimson rump and a short square tail. It is fond of flower-nectar and has a very sweet voice.

The habits of all these parrots are similar. They all live in flocks and in trees. They do not move from one part of the country to another when the seasons change. They are swift in flight and are very noisy both when they fly and when they roost. Fruits and grain form their main food. If they ate only the berries of the peepul and banyan trees, nobody would object. But they swoop down in their thousands on standing crops and destroy whole fields within a few hours.

The cage-parrot is usually fed on gram and chillies. Have you ever got bitten trying to feed groundnuts to zoo parrots? Red chillies, it is said, make their tongue sharp and their voice strong.

The parrot has a long life. A gentleman in Kanpur has a parrot which is said to be more than one hundred years old ! Parrots do not build nests. They lay eggs in the holes of trees, particularly silk-cotton and coral trees. Some varieties have been seen to lay eggs in holes on river banks and in chinks in old houses. Silk-cotton trees have a long life, and they are not very hard. Therefore, many of them have big holes in their trunks and branches which make a good home for the parrots. There is a belief that parrots born in silk-cotton holes are more talkative than others.

You read a little while ago that the large Indian Parrot is called the Alexandrine Parakeet. That is because Alexander the Great is said to have introduced parrots into Europe. While returning from India, Alexander took a few of them. Though he died in Iran, his men carried them back to Greece. They were so well liked that soon it became a fashion to keep parrots. All ships that took cargoes of cloth and spices from our country to the West also carried large number of parrots. They have till today remained a favourite with sailors. Do you remember Long John Silver's parrot in *The Treasure Island* ?

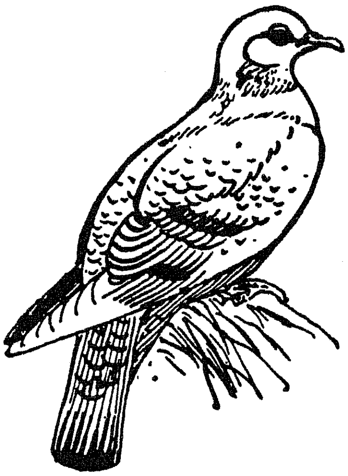
Parrots have four toes in each foot, two in front and two in the rear. They can use their feet as hands to hold eatables, and look very thoughtful when they have their bite. They use their feet as well as their strong bill while scaling wire meshes or the walls of their cage. The Lorikeet puts its feet to a special use. It is a bird which sleeps like the bat, head downwards, with its feet clutching the thinner branches of trees.

Generally the parrots lay eggs from March to May in North India and in January and February in South India. The eggs are white and very smooth.

Properly trained, the parrot can do many tricks. It can light a torch, fire a toy-gun and do drill when music is played. Parrot circuses might be seen now and then in village fairs. I have seen a parrot in Calcutta, at a friend's place, which is very fond of hot tea. It sits at the feet of its master, like a dog, and starts asking, as soon as a visitor enters the room, "Who is he? Who is he?" It gets jealous of children if its master's maid picks them up, and starts pecking the babies. In fact it behaves just like a spoilt child. Some religious people have taught parrots to repeat the name of God.

For ages the parrot has been a pet bird in our country. It has been mentioned in many Sanskrit books, apart from folk tales. One of the most famous of our ancient story books is the *Shukasaptati* which is a collection of seventy stories told by a wise parrot. In the famous book called *Kadambari,* it is a parrot that narrates the story.

THE PIGEON



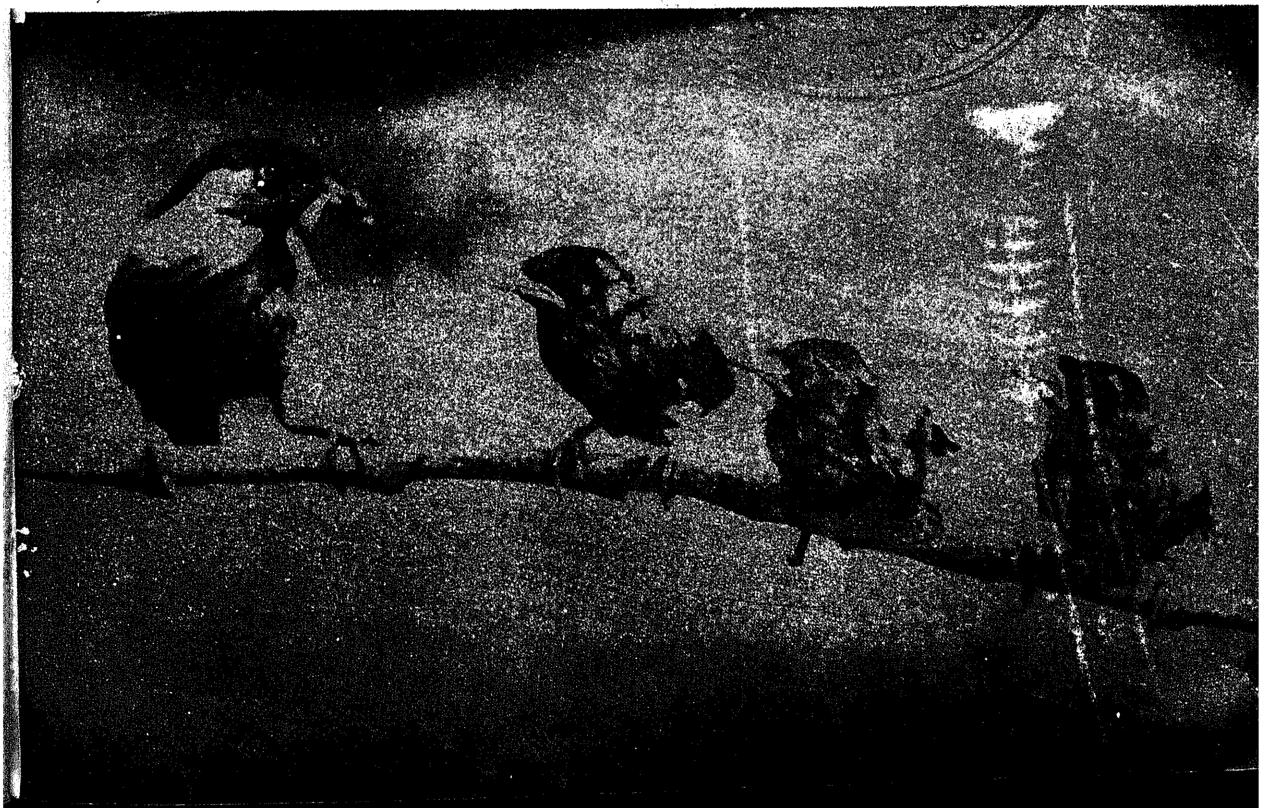
We now come to some of the gentlest of all birds, pigeons and doves. Some of you might indeed be rearing pigeons in your houses. But how many of you can tell the difference between pigeons and doves? Though so much alike, they differ in their nature. The dove roosts on trees and rarely comes near us. The pigeon, on the other hand, is bold and not afraid of man. It lives in buildings or rock-holes and not on trees. Pigeons and doves differ also in colour. in size, the pigeon is larger than the dove.

There are two kinds of pigeons—wild ones and domesticated ones. The wild pigeons are known as Blue Rock Pigeons and are found all over the country even in the snow-clad cave of Amarnath in Kashmir. The Rock Pigeon is about 33 cms. in length. It is slaty-gray in colour, with a neck and upper breast of metallic green and purple. There are two dark bars on the wings and a broad black bar across the tail-end. A white patch is found at the root of the outer feathers. The bill is black, with a swollen base. The legs are of a reddish colour.

Domestic pigeons, again, are of many varieties. It was chiefly during the Muslim period of our history that keeping pigeons became a vogue, although pigeons have been mentioned even in the Vedas. Several races of pigeon were introduced into our country when the Sultans and Badshahs ruled from Delhi. They were of all colours, pure-white, black, green, spotted, pink, and so on. Five of these varieties are prominent : 1. the Girahbaz that soars high in the sky and which, if it flies out in the morning, returns only at nightfall, having travelled many miles ; 2 the Lotan that starts rolling on the ground with a slight stroke of the hands ; 3. The Shirazee and the Baghdadee which were brought here in the old days from the cities of

A Young Koel

Myna brings food for her young ones



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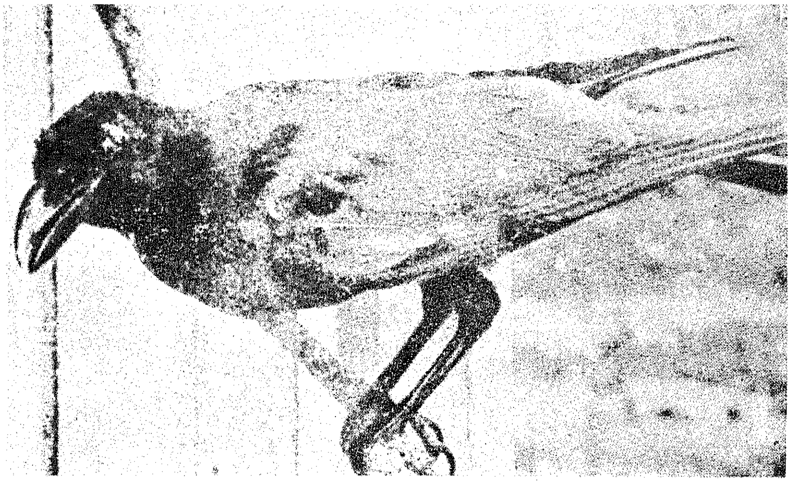
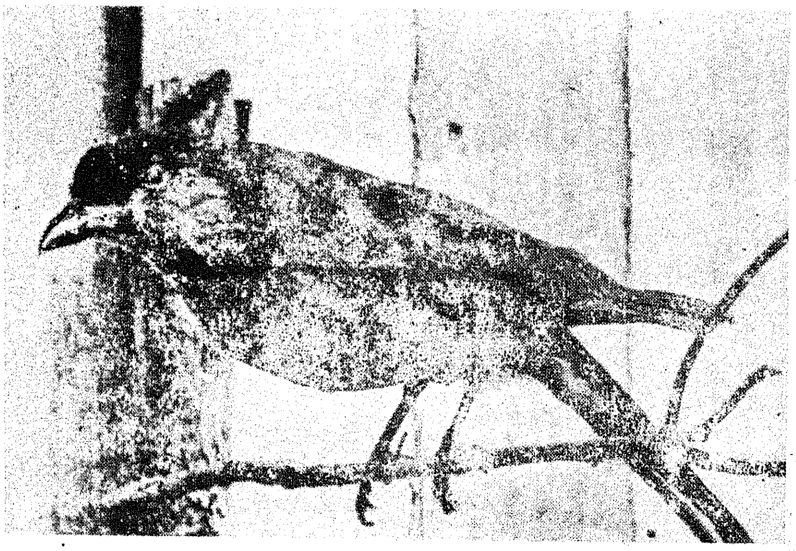
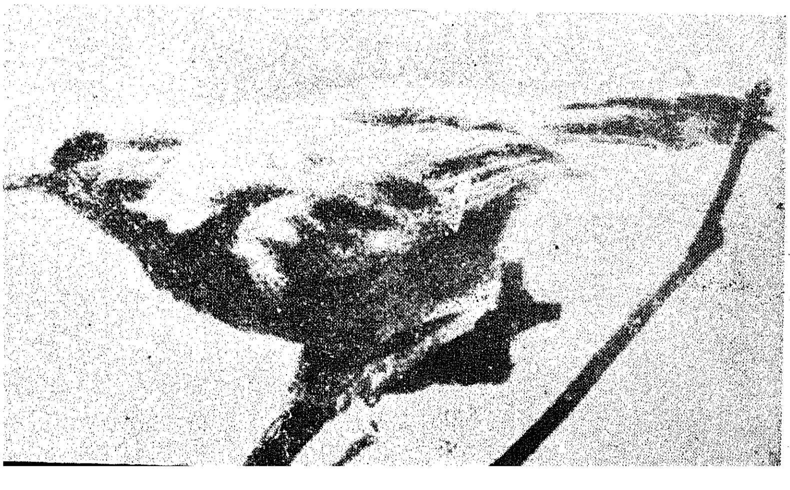


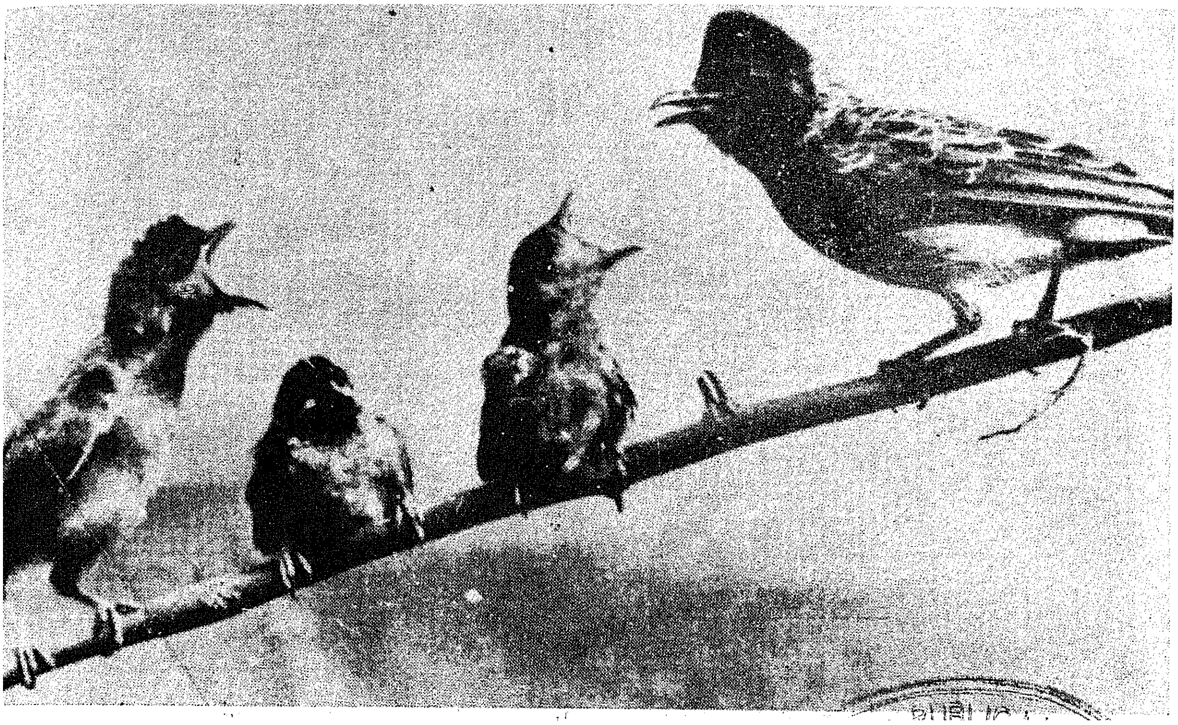
House Crow



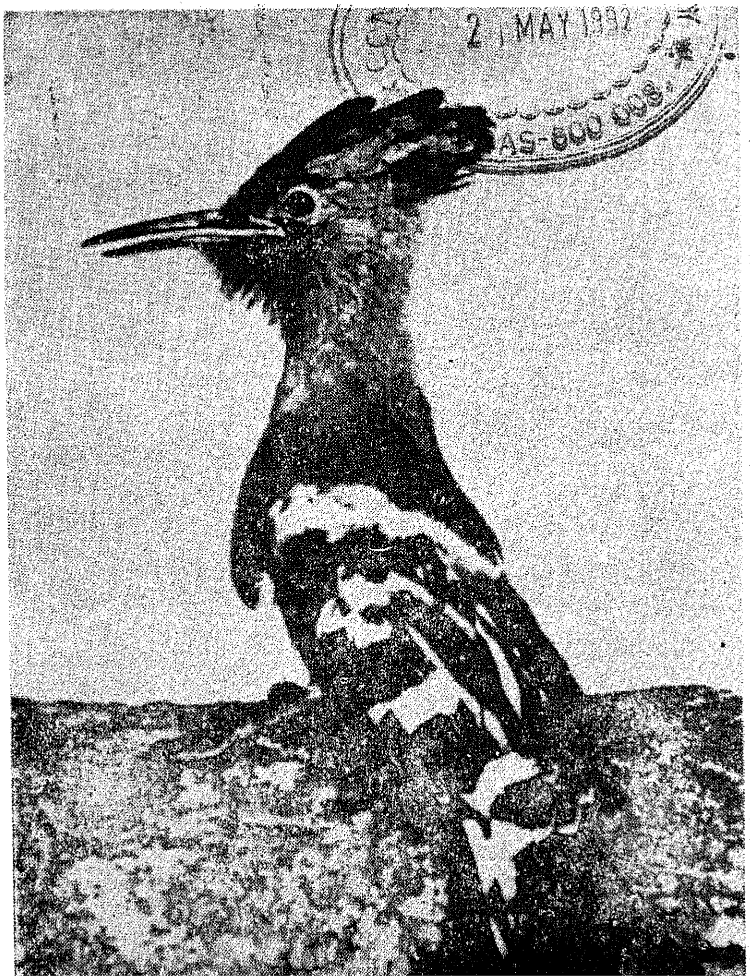
Jungle Crow



A Jungle Babbler
or one of the
Seven Sisters



Young Bulbuls greet their mother



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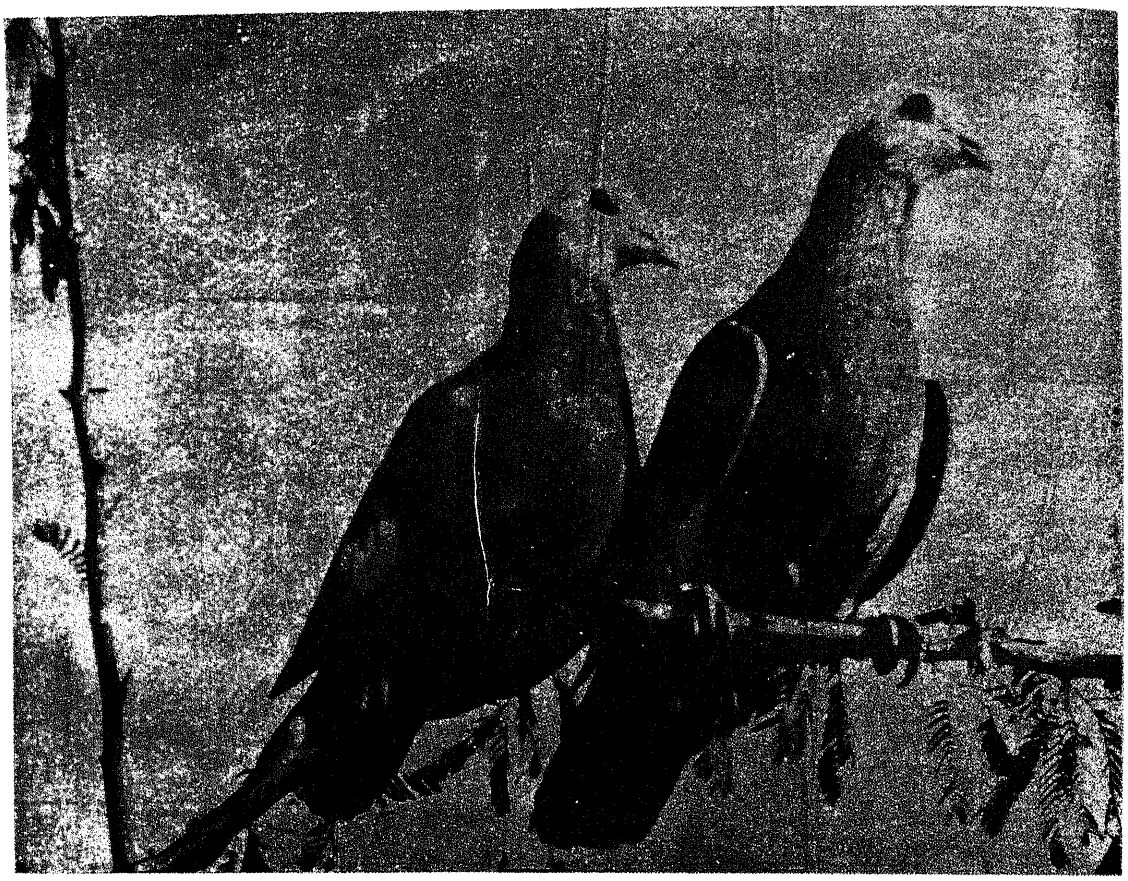
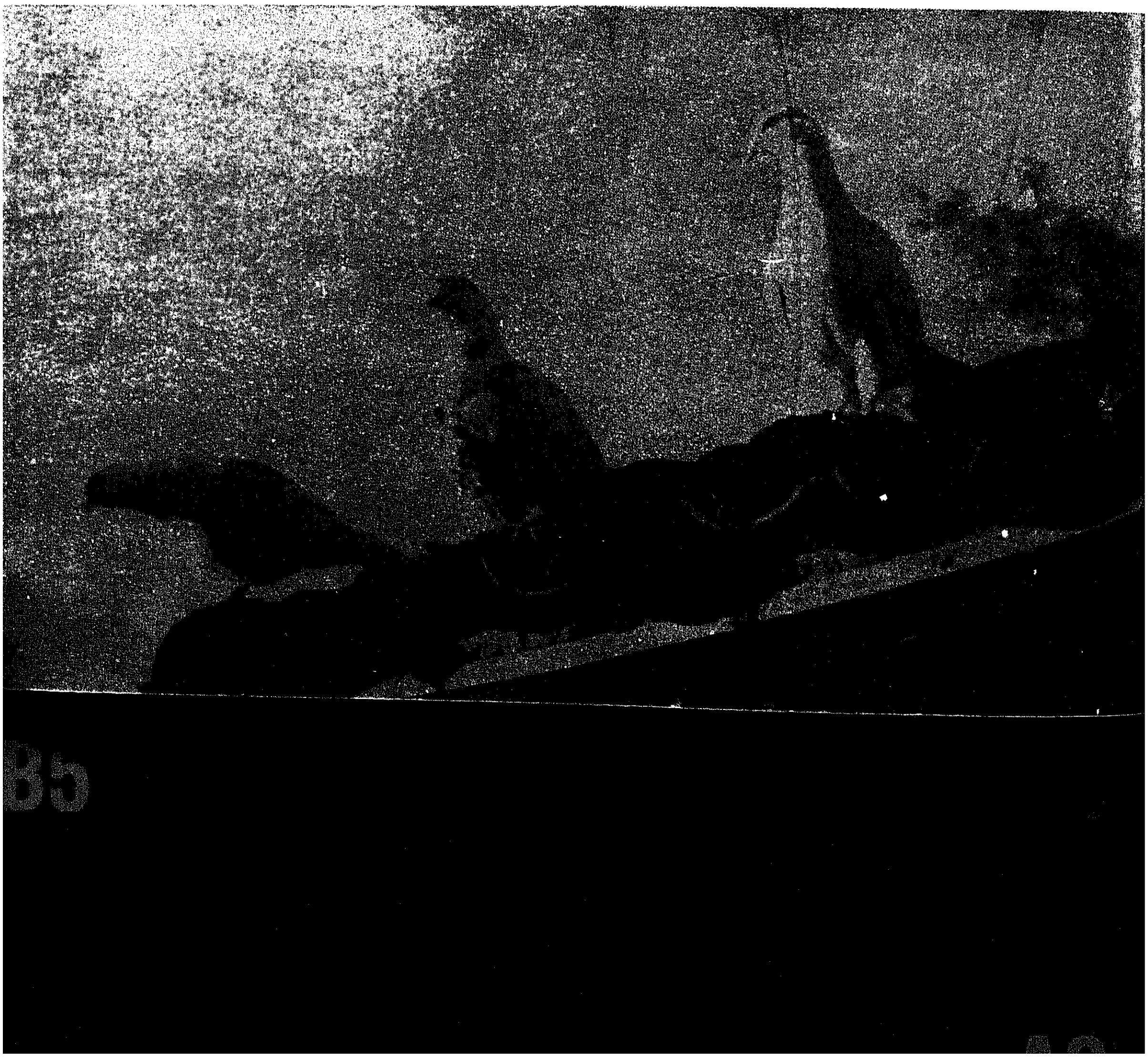
Hoopoe



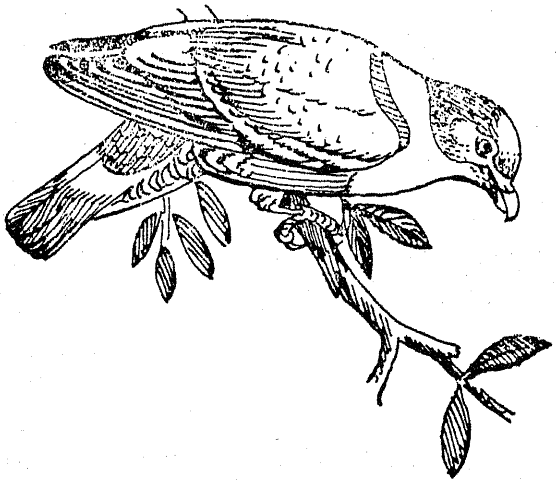
A Pair of Pigeons

Pet Pigeons



Shiraz and Baghdad and are exquisitely beautiful; 4. the Mukhi which has a blackish head and a pure white body; and 5. the Lakka which has an upraised tail like the fan of a Japanese lady. There is another variety of which the neck gets swollen if you blow into its mouth.

All these are domestic pigeons which cannot live away from people. They dwell in places especially provided for them. The Rock Pigeons, on the other hand, live in freedom. Although wild, they love to live in towns and cities and are found hundreds in big buildings. You can see thousands and thousands of them in the city of Bombay where rich merchants belonging to the Jain community regularly feed them with grain. They make themselves very comfortable on the roadside and do not seem to be bothered by the busy traffic. They become so gentle that even if you touch them with your hands they will not fly.



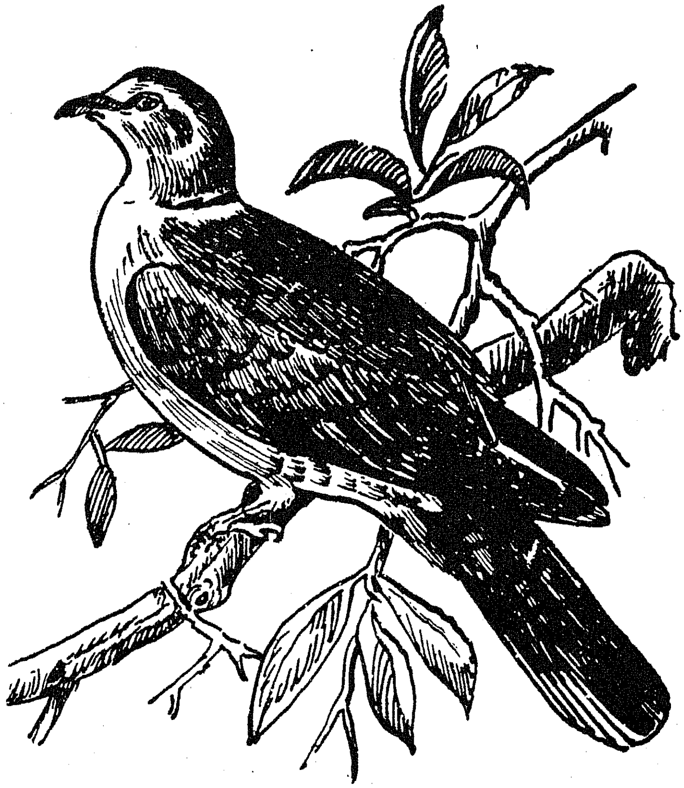
The pigeon's nest is a platform of thin roots and twigs and it is built at all sorts of places...roof corners, rooms of old buildings, unused wells and wherever there is some shelter from rain and sun. The pigeon lays two white eggs at a time. When the young ones come out of the eggshell, the mother feeds them with a milky substance that it brings out of its mouth. There is no other bird that does so

You must have heard of carrier pigeons. From very early times pigeons have been used to carry written messages. They were so used even during World War I over fifty years ago. It is said that Akbar, the Moghul emperor, had in his keeping twenty thousand such pigeons which carried mail from one part of the country to another.

There is a belief that pigeons are useful in curing some illnesses. The breeze caused by the beating of their wings, some say is good for heart patients, and the meat of the Lakka Pigeon is given to people suffering from paralysis.

Have you watched a pair of pigeons closely? The male and the female are very fond of each other and are always together. In fact, they pair for life. Often the male dances round the female and tries to please her through its dance and its song which to our ears sounds as *gut-ru-goon*. "To live like a pair of pigeons' is to have a happy married life.

THE DOVE



Let us now turn to the doves. You must have heard words like 'dove of peace', and 'harmless as a dove.' The dove is regarded as a symbol of love, peace, patience and innocence.

Doves generally live in trees but move about on house-tops looking for grain to eat and water to drink. The five varieties of doves most common in our country are the Rufous Turtle Dove, the Spotted Dove, the Ring Dove, the Brown Dove and the Red Turtle Dove.

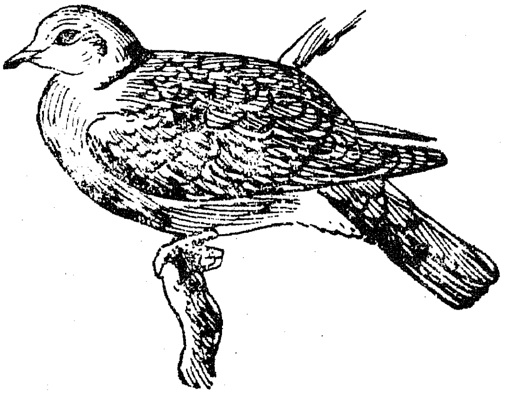
The Rufous Turtle Dove is the biggest of all doves. Rufous means reddish-brown, and that is the colour of its body. But there is a patch of black and bluish-grey scale markings on the two sides of the neck. The tail is long, and is white or slaty-grey. The bill is brown; the legs are red and the claws are black. The eggs are whitish.

The Spotted Dove is about 30 cms. in length, and is prettier than the Turtle Dove. It can be easily known by the white spots on its brown upper parts. The neck has white-and-black patches. The edge of the wing carries a grey band. The skin round the eye is reddish and the legs are black. It is thirsty almost all the time and is, therefore, fond of water-banks.

The Ring Dove is the most common dove in India. It is pale grey and brown in colour, with a black collar round the neck.

The Brown Dove is not so plump or shy as the other doves. It is brown in colour, with grey patches on the sides of the wings and a square black patch like a chess-board on the sides of the neck. It often builds its nests in the roofs of our houses and keeps walking round our compounds. Its call is somewhat like *toot-ru-toon.*

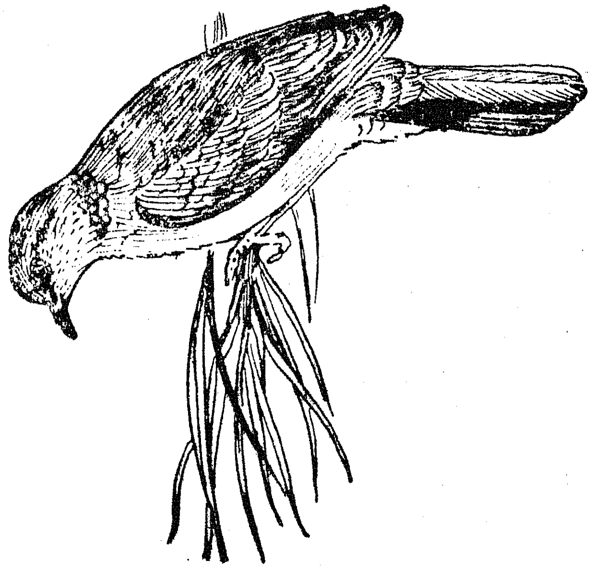
The Red Turtle Dove is the only variety of dove in which the male differs from the female. The male is bright brick-red in colour while the female is pale brownish grey, looking like a small Ring Dove. Like the Spotted Dove this dove also hovers around water because it seems to be always thirsty.



Doves of all races, like pigeons, live by gleaning grains and seeds from the ground. The call of some doves sounds like a soft whistle. Hence the phrase 'sucking doves'. But each variety coos in a slightly different way. Doves lay eggs not in any particular season, but throughout the year. Two eggs are laid at a time, and they are white in colour. Their nest is a clumsily built platform of rootlets and twigs.

The dove has been mentioned many times in the Bible, the religious book of the Christians. It is said that the power of God alighted on Jesus in the shape of a dove. According to the Old Testament, when the entire earth was under a flood, God wanted to save Noah, who was a good man. He and his family got into an ark, or large boat, along with some birds and animals. It was a dove that Noah sent to find out if the water had receded from any part of the earth so that his ark could be landed. When the dove came back a third time with a branch of the olive tree, Noah knew that some portion

of the earth had become dry and he could, therefore land there.



Christians consider the dove a messenger of peace and they do not kill it. Male and female doves live together constantly and love each other dearly. Very rarely do doves quarrel among themselves or with other birds.

A friend of mine once shot a dove. Its spouse, instead of flying away in fear, came again and again and sat near the dead one. I remember how moving the cry of the dove was.

THE KITE

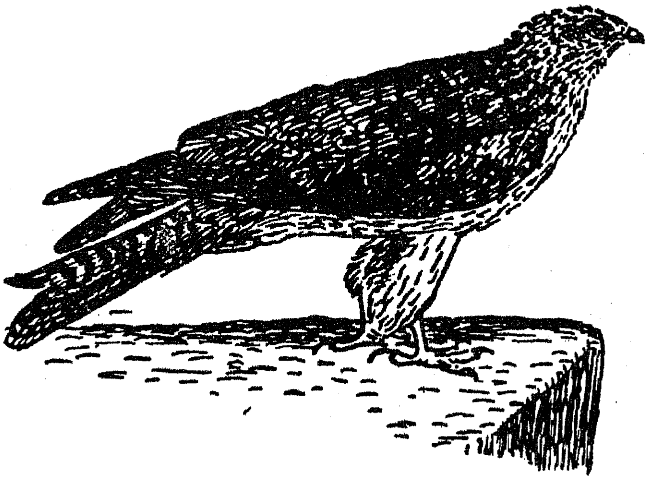
The kite earns its food in the same way as the 'House' Crow. Both are never far away from where people live. Often they snatch bread and fruit from the hands of young children. The kite, much bolder in this respect than the crow, robs even adults of their food. You must have watched how the kite keeps flying over our house neatly like an aeroplane, and how, as soon as any eatable is sighted, it descends and lays hold of the morsel in the twinkling of an eye. It does this with such a force that people have often been hurt. Kites have been known to have taken away even jewels and ornaments, mistaking them for food.

Kites are particularly fond of meat and fish, and you may see dozens of them above fish and meat markets. In places where silk is produced, they wait on the premises for the worms to be thrown out after the silk is spun out of the boiled cocoons. Kites also feed on rats, caterpillars, lizards and frogs, and have a special relish for the young ones of other birds. They have a sharp eye, and keep a careful watch even from the sky on the movements of any rat or lizard they might have sighted. At the right movement they pounce on the prey and, having caught it, 'fly' to a neighbouring tree, before starting to eat it bit by bit.

There are many varieties of the kite in this country. Of them, two are prominent. The first is the common Pariah Kite which we see in market-places as also near paddy and sugarcane fields. It has an ash-brown body and a forked tail. The wings are darker than the rest

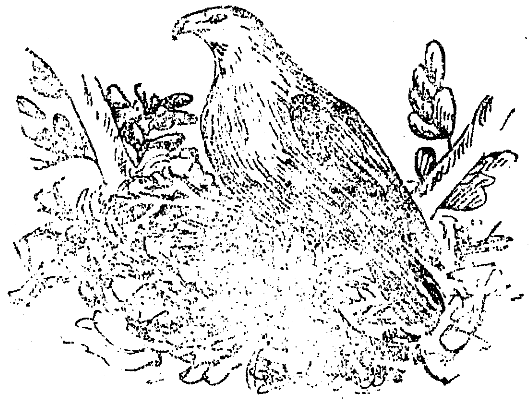
of the body and the head and neck have a pale yellow colouring over their brown complexion. The bill and claws are black. It is a scavenger bird, eating up what we throw away. Sometimes it attacks crows and the common kites and snatches their food. It often sits on the top of our houses waiting for something to come its way and occasionally giving out a shrill call sounding somewhat like *"chee-ee-ee-ee"* The Hindi Name for the bird is Cheel.

The kite generally builds its nest on palms or other tall trees near the place where it finds its food. The breeding season is between December and May and the colour of the eggs is brownish grey with spots of pink or blue. It lays two or three eggs at a time.



The other important variety of kite in India is the Brahminy Kite. It is smaller in size than the Pariah Kite, and has a bright reddish-brown body with a white head, neck and breast. The tips of the wings are black, and the tail-tip is white. Its bill is hooked and is of a bluish horny colour. The upper portions of the legs are feathered. The Brahminy Kite generally lives and nests near rivers, ponds and damp places. Its eggs are somewhat smaller than those of the common kite. The male and female

look alike. The Brahminy Kite is supposed to be of the race of Garuda, which, in Hindu mythology, is dear to Lord Vishnu. Some pious people fold their hands and utter a prayer when they see a Brahminy Kite. Near Madras there is a famous place of pilgrimage called Pakshitirtham, where at noon-time everyday two Brahminy Kites descend from the sky and feed on the offerings of the priest. When, after some moments, they fly back in the same direction as they came from. Hundreds of pilgrims from different parts of the country gather to have a view of them. This has been happening for centuries at Pakshitirtham. People believe that the two birds which visit the place are Garuda and his consort. The remarkable thing is that the birds land there at the exact hour each day. And there are never more than two. This is as surprising as the presence of a pair of pigeons at Amarnath in Kashmir even though the icy cave has no vegetation and there is nothing but snow for miles around.



THE HAWKS

Indian hawks are mainly of three kinds, the Baz, the falcon and the Shikara. All of them kill for food and the female hawk is always a better hunter than the male.

The Baz is the largest of three kinds. It is widely referred to in literature. It is brown above and white below, with black streaks on the throat and deep chestnut streaks on the breast. The female is known as Jurra and is far more ferocious. In the olden times, to prey with the hawk was a popular pastime with both the nobles and the common people. Akbar the Great and his son Jehangir were very fond of it. There are paintings of them with a hawk on the right gloved hand. It is said that Queen Elizabeth I of England was also fond of this game. So was Frederick the Great of Germany.

Then we come to the falcon or Bahari, of which there are a number of varieties like Lagar, Turmuti and Khermutia. The Bahari is courageous and has been known to catch even ducks which fly in the sky. It is definitely the most daring and skilful among the birds of prey. But it has one bad quality. If it misses its prey, it often goes away in another direction instead of returning to the owner. There is a saying that the Bahari would be worth its weight in gold if it did not go away from the owner off and on.

The Turmuti (Red-headed Merlin) is a sub-species of Bahari. The female is called by this name, the male being called Chetwa. It is

the size of a pigeon, with a reddish-brown head. The upper plumage is bluish-grey, while the underside is white, with black bars on the abdomen and flanks.

The Lagar, on the other hand, is an ashy brown bird with brown streaks on the white lower plumage. There are thin brown stripes in front and below the eyes.

The Khermutia is even smaller than the Lagar. The upper plumage of the male is brick-red. The head is grey. The female has a rufous head with the upper plumage marked with blackish cross-bars. The underparts are like those of the male, light buff in colour, with brown spots.

The Shikara is the smallest of the birds of prey, and is a very common bird of our gardens. It looks very much like the Hawk-Cuckoo. The male and the female are different. The upper plumage of the male is ashy blue-grey. The lower plumage is white with brown cross-bars all over. The female is lager and browner. The upper plumage has a grey tint. The bill is stout and curved. The eyes are fierce and are orange in hue.

The Shikara may often be noticed sitting on trees waiting patiently for its prey. The more docile birds are greatly afraid of it. A hawk among the doves' is a familar metaphor in most of our languages. Have you seen what a panic is created in any flock of small birds when a hawk flies near? Once a Baz came very near the cage of a canary of mine. The tender song-bird collapsed at the very sight of the Baz.

In days of yore it was a fashion to maintain these birds. The sport of falconry has led to some fierce quarrels. It is said that once the ruling chief of Kangra came to attend the 'durbar' of Emperor Akbar. With the chief was his son, the Rajkumar, who was carrying a hawk. The Moghul Crown Prince, Jahangir, took a fancy for it and asked the Rajkumar to give it to him. The Rajkumar, unwilling to part with it, replied that he would, on returning home, send the female which was a far better bird of prey than the male he had brought. This answer did not satisfy the prince, and he bore it in mind. In course of time Akbar died and Jahangir came to the throne.

By then the chief of Kangra had also passed away and his son was on the throne. Jahangir remembered the incident and sent a force to Kangra. The Raja was defeated, taken prisoner and then beheaded. Thus was royal anger avenged. It was common practice in those days for the smaller kings and the noblemen of the court to offer gifts of falcons and Shikaras to the Emperor of Delhi. The Shikara, being easily available, was popular with the common people. But kings and nobles preferred the Baz.

The Shikara sits on the hand or shoulder of the master. At his behest it promptly takes to wing, catches birds and brings them back to him holding them with its stout bill. The bill of all hawks is short, stout and hooked. Their claws are very strong. That is how they are able to prey upon birds even larger than themselves.

The breeding season of all of them is between February and June. They build nests on trees. The clutch of eggs consists of three to four. The Shikara's eggs are bluish, and those of the other hawks and falcons pinkish.

THE HOOPOE

We often see a brownish bird with zebra-striped feathers, a fanshaped crest and a long bill, probing into the soil in front of our house as if searching for something lost. This is the hoopoe. It figures in the legends of Greece, Egypt and the West Asian countries. It is found in the wall paintings of ancient Egypt and Crete, painted more than three thousand years ago. It is considered sacred in many lands.

The hoopoe is nearly 30 cms. in length. Its body is fawncoloured and the wings and tail have black and white marketings like those on a zebra. The bill is not only long but thin and curved, like an old-type nail-cutter. (Hence the name "She-barber" in Northern India). Its stately crest, which looks like the head-dress of a forest chieftain, stands up when the bird gets excited.

There is a very interesting story in the Muslim countries about the hoopoe's crest. It is said that King Solomon, known for his great wisdom, was once travelling in the sky in his flying throne. The sun was very hot and the king felt uncomfortable. Just then he saw the chief of vultures passing by. He asked him to fly over his head so that he could get some shade. But the chief of vultures refused to do so. Solomon cursed him and said that the neck of vultures should be without any feathers so that they would have no protection from

the rays of the burning sun. A little later the king came across the chief of the hoopoes. He made the same request to him. The Hoopoe-chief at once agreed and hence the rest of the king's journey was comfortable. Solomon was, therefore, pleased with the hoopoe-chief and wanted him to ask for a reward.

The chief consulted his spouse. She said he should ask for a crest of gold for the whole race. The Hoopoe-chief returned to Solomon and made his request. The king smiled and asked him to reconsider the wish, but the chief was stubborn and so the boon was granted.

Thereafter a golden crest appeared on the head of every hoopoe. But it did not prove to be an unmixed blessing. Men saw that the crest was of gold and started killing hoopoes for its sake. It looked as if the end of the race was near. In fear and grief the Hoopoe-chief went to Solomon and begged him for protection. The king said : "Did I not ask you to reconsider your request ? I knew that would happen, but you were haughty and did not listen to me. However, from now onwards the crest will be of feathers instead of gold." Thus the Hoopoe race was saved from ruin. Though made only of feathers and not of gold, the crest still looks regal ; as a result, the bird is called "Shah Suleman" in the countries of West Asia.

The hoopoe is found in most parts of Asia, Africa and Europe, and is divided into a number of sub-races based on variation of size and colour. It feeds on caterpillars and other insects that live under grass and fallen leaves. It is in search of these that the hoopoe always keeps probing the earth. It prefers the open country to thick jungles. It keeps its crest low while feeding. It is a fast walker. Farmers regard it as a friend because it eats insects and larvae.

It nests in holes but keeps its home very dirty and smelly. 'Filthy like a Hoopoe' is a common term in French.

The hoopoe lays three to ten eggs at a time between February and July. Its call is loud and sounds like *uk-uk-uk* repeated thrice. There is hardly a garden in this country where the Hoopoe is not to be seen. It is found in plains as well as in hills up to a height of about 1500 metres.

THE BLUE JAY
(ROLLER)

Of the size of a pigeon, the Blue Jay, called Nilkantha in Sanskrit and other Indian languages, is a bird of striking colour scheme. Its main features are a biggish head, a black bill, an abdomen and underparts of pale blue and wings of varying shades of blue. The whole range of colours is disclosed when it is in flight.

You have heard the old proverb : 'All that glitters is not gold'. This applies very aptly to the Blue Jay. It looks blue and beautiful, but it is cruel and quarrelsome. It is a common sight to see two Blue Jays fighting in a ploughed field like two wrestlers. They make great noise when they quarrel, and fight on the slightest excuse,

Lizards, frogs, large insects, small insects, all find a place on their menu. It is said that the Blue Jay acts like a butcher. While other birds also eat insects, they do not spend the entire day in looking for them. The Blue Jay, however, lives to kill and eat. Every moment of its day is spent in search of food. It usually sits very still on a telegraph pole or tree stump looking for insects. As soon as one is sighted, it swoops down upon it like a bomber plane and catches it. The poor-victim is torn to pieces and devoured the next moment.

Though the Blue Jay is harsh, the male bird tries its best to please the female. It flies up into the sky and then nose-dives to where the female sits, sometimes coming down limp, as if it was dead, but suddenly recovering and flying back to its former position. The bird is called Roller because of these rolls and somersaults in the sky. All this is done to impress Mrs. Roller.

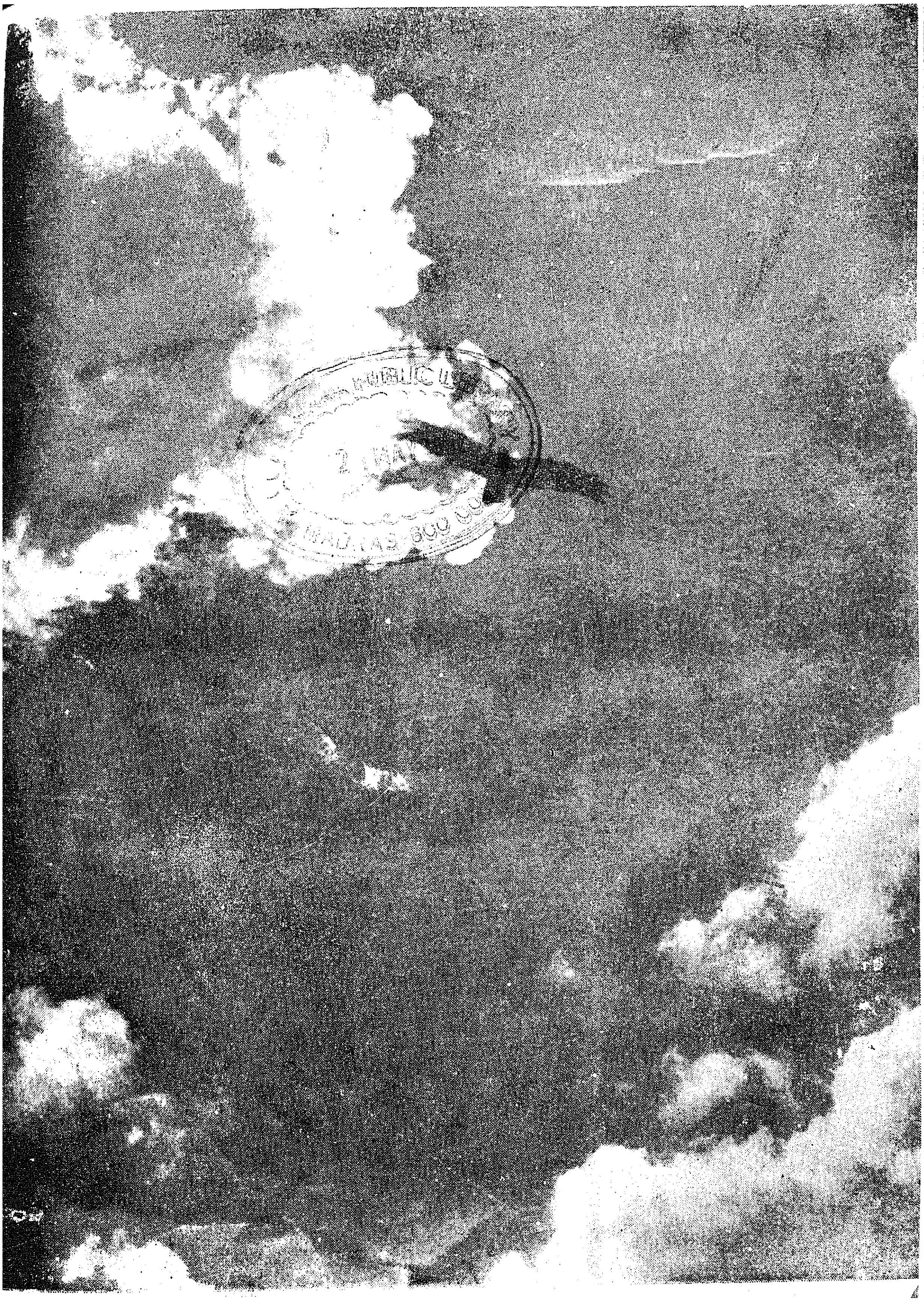
There are three main races of the bird found in our country. The prettiest is the one found in Kashmir. Feather collectors are very fond of Blue Jay feathers. A large number of the birds are killed each year for the sake of the colourful feathers, proving the old saying that beauty is often a danger. Similar is the fate of another famous bird which is found in New Guinea and is called Bird of Paradise. It is one of the world's most beautiful birds, and it used to be killed in hundreds each year because European ladies had a fancy for its feathers.

The nesting season of the Blue Jay is from February to May. The nest is built in a hole which is like a mouse-tunnel bored in a raised portion of the earth. It lays eggs also in tree-holes. The eggs are pure white in colour and four to seven in number.

THE TREE PIE

Among men, we have good and honest people as well as rogues and thieves, So it is with birds Pigeons and doves, for example are innocent and harmless. But there are birds like the Tree Pie which beat hollow even the crow in the art of stealing. You might have noticed a long-tailed brown bird quietly moving about on trees as if searching for something. That is the Tree Pie which in Bengali is known by the name of "Taka Chore" or 'money thief.' It does not steal money, but something even more precious, a budding life. The Tree Pie silently steals into the nest of another bird and eats the chicks lying there. It does this very cunningly and quietly. It often happens that while a bird sits on its eggs, the Tree Pie slowly creeps under the branch on which the nest is built and, from underneath the nest, pricks a hole into the egg and eats the contents. The mother bird is all the while unaware that a murder is being committed in its own house. Sometimes the Tree Pie boldly forces its way into another bird's nest. A foreign diplomat in India has described how in his Delhi garden a Tree Pie once tried to get into the nest of Green Pigeon and how the mother pigeon, who was alone, fought with the intruder. Luckily, the male pigeon arrived soon after, and the Tree Pie was forced to flee.

Just as some thieves dress smartly and look like gentlemen, the Tree Pie hides its evil heart in a pretty body. It is the size of a Myna

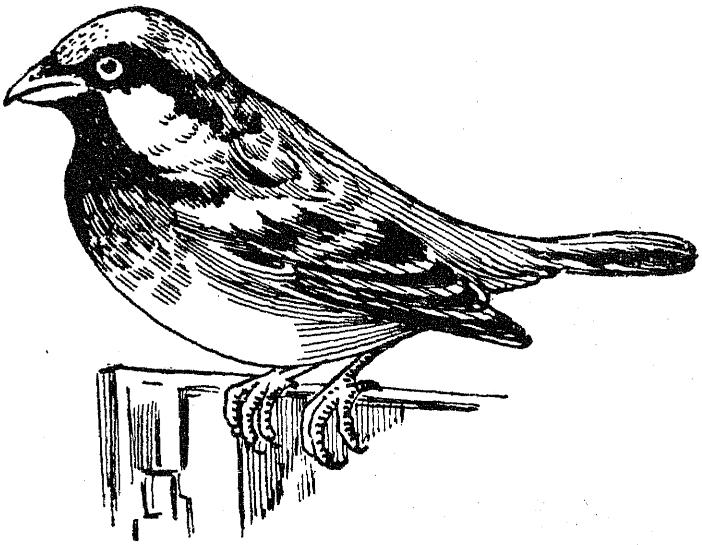


A kite soars in the sky

A King with a Hawk (from an old painting)

and has a tail which is nearly 30 cms. in length. The body is chestnut brown but the head, neck and chest are dull black. The long tail is grey. On the tail tip and the wings there are greyish white patches. It makes a variety of sounds, some soft and some very harsh. Apart from other birds' chicks, it also eats wasps and little snakes. Like the Jungle Crow, it hovers around dead animals in forests, sometimes giving a clue to the movements of tigers and leopards.

Its nesting season begins in February and ends in July. Careful, like all thieves, it does not show itself freely. It hides amidst leaves and rarely walks on the ground. It builds its nest up in trees or in big bushes. The nest looks like that of the other bird thief, the crow. The eggs, vary in colour, but are mostly pale red with streaks of reddish brown colour. Fearing that others might do to it what it does to others, the tree pie does not let any other bird build its nest on the same tree on which it nests. Its chicks are very noisy. Unlike the young ones of other birds, they go about with their parents for a long time. Obviously the training of a young thief takes time !



THE SPARROW

The House Crow and the House Sparrow are unwelcome guests in our homes. But there is a difference. The crow does not settle down in our dwellings as the sparrow does. It comes only up to our verandahs, kitchens and courtyards and no further; but the sparrow comes right into the inner rooms. Having come in, it behaves as if it were the owner and we, the strangers in the house. Moving from place to place, it sits at the dressing table one moment and on the almirah another moment, and then, if the room is to its liking, it starts building a nest. Before we realise what is happening, husband and wife move in. Soon eggs are laid, and in due time little sparrows come out, adding to the flutter and noise. And for all this, no permission is sought!

Often while we sit at our writing table deep in thought and work, a bundle of grass-roots comes down on our head. We look up and find a pair of sparrows sitting on the cornice and feeling pleased at our plight. At times they even hop on to the table and try to disturb the papers, not caring how busy we are. When I was in prison I had many experiences of this nature. I still remember how confused I was when a pair of sparrows built their nest inside my Gandhi cap which

I had placed on a rack. I could not decide what to do with the couple of eggs they had laid there. I had finally to leave them as they were. The great patriot and writer, Maulana Azad, however, found sparrows to be cheerful friends. He has written a lovely essay on them in Urdu.

Sparrows are found in all parts of India, in the plains as well as on the hills, however high. The hot Rajasthan desert and the snowy Himalayan ranges are alike to them. In fact, there is no country where they are not found. There are two main types of sparrows in our land—the House Sparrow and the Yellow-throated Sparrow. The latter is called Tooti.

The House Sparrow is about 15 cms. in length. The male, which differs from the famale, has an ash-grey head. The colour around the eye is chestnut-brown. The same colour is found on the hind neck, back and shoulders. The wings are a mixture of chestnut and dark brown, with two pale bars. There is a thin black patch from the beak to the eye and a broader one from the chin to the upper breast. The cheeks and the lower plumage are of a dull white colour. The female is much paler. Its upper plumage is earth-brown and lower plumage ash-white The wings are brown and have two whitish bars on them. The bill of both male and female is short and stout. There is a Himalayan species of this bird which is smaller in size and has an upper plumage of cinnamon-red colour.

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The nest of the House Sparrow is a lump of straw, rags and fibres. The eggs are ashy in colour, and four or five in number.

The Tooti, or Yellow-throated Sparrow has an earth-brown complexion, a prominent shoulder-patch and two whitish bars on the wing. The species gets its name from the lemon yellow patch on the throat. The female does not have this yellow patch. It lives on trees, breeding in holes, and is exceedingly fond of flower pollen. It figures very prominently in Urdu poetry. It has a sweet but very faint voice which has given birth to the saying: "Who will hear a Tooti where drums are beating." It is a popular cage-bird.

With the House Sparrows we are all familiar. They are fond of a morning bath. Their dipping in water basins and flying off is a common sight at sunrise. They bathe in dust also. Ghagh, a well-known village poet of Northern India, has said that if House Sparrows are seen bathing in dust it is a sign that rains are on the way.

Children love sparrow, mothers dislike them, and grandmothers are fond of throwing rice and other grains for them to pick up. In fact, House Sparrows cannot live away from people. When they do not build nests inside our homes they roost in their hundreds in the trees in our compounds. They are also to be found in front of grain shops. The town sparrows go in groups to the countryside when corn and fruit are plentiful. They chirp without rest and are quarrelsome. A pair of sparrows will have not one or two but a dozen fights each day. When the two of them are busy fighting other sparrows gather round and try to stop the fight. But the fighters seldom listen. Sometimes they fight for fun too.

The deadly enemy of the sparrows is a small hawk known as Sparrow Hawk. Then there is a type of fly which builds its nest on the same spot as the sparrow and sticks closely to the body of sparrow chicks in large number and sucks their blood. The chicks are dead in no time.

The House Sparrow is not regarded as a cage-bird in our country, but in ancient Rome it was. A Roman poet once called it the best of playmates.

THE OWL

The owl differs a good deal from all other birds both in habits and in the very build of body. First of all, while other birds delight in daylight, the owl prefers the night. It cannot bear the blazing light of the sun. But it is not correct to say that it cannot see at daytime. The owl has often been seen flying from one tree to another during broad daylight.

Secondly, unlike other birds of prey, the owl does not eat its victim by bits but gulps it whole. Further, it does not show any sign of fear, as other birds do, when face to face with man. It remains on its perch as if it does not care for the person. It often stares at him straight and then suddenly leaves the place. You are free to think the owl is annoyed with you!

So much for some of its habits. Now for some of its peculiar physical features. The owl's eyes are not at the sides but in front, like the eyes of human beings. We all know how big and roundish they are. The owl can move its neck, as we can, to look behind. Then again, the owl flies noiselessly, because, its feathers are as soft as Pashmina wool. Finally, we can see the ears of the owl while those of the other birds can rarely be seen, because they are shorter and are covered with small feathers.

There are many varieties of owls and owlets in our country. The more prominent of them are the Barn Owl, the Fish Owl, the Horned Owl, the Spotted Owl and the common Jungle Owlet.

The Barn Owl has a golden and grey colour above, with black and white dots. The underparts are silky white, with deep brown spots. The head is large and round, and very owlish. The Barn Owl lives in ruined cities, crumbling buildings and particularly in barns where it can get plenty of mice and rats to eat. They form its staple food. It spends the day in some dark corner of the house, doing nothing, but becomes active with nightfall. Coming out of its cosy corner, it hunts its food lustily, often giving out hoots. What some people have taken to be ghosts haunting ruined buildings have often proved to be owls on the roof. Their sound is commonly thought to be very ominous.

The Fish Owl is a massive owl of brown complexion with yellow eyes. Its head resembles that of a cat, particularly because it has large ear tufts. The neck is whitish and the legs have no feathers. The Fish Owl lives mostly in trees by water-side. It is fond of fish and crabs, and catches them most skilfully. Its claws have sharp cutting edges, and these help it to catch fish and hold them firmly.

The Horned Owl is very much like the Fish Owl except that its legs are feathered. Above its face, it has two prominent 'horns' which have given it this name. It is found in large numbers in the northern and central parts of the country.

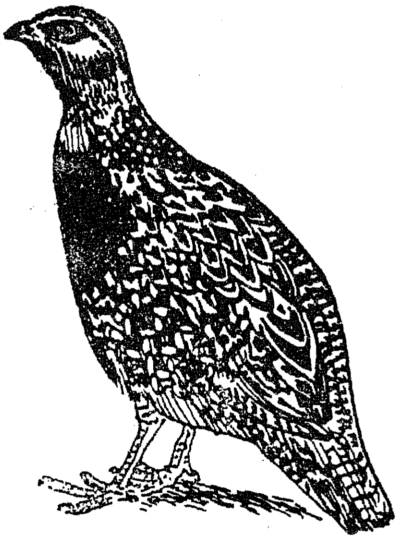
The Spotted Owl is a familiar bird of the plains and is known by its Hindi name Khusat. It is much smaller than the three kinds of owls already described. It is greyish brown in colour and has white spots on the body and bright yellow eyes. It lives in the gardens in and around our houses, and flies right into our verandahs to catch insects that gather round the lamps at night. You would all have heard the Spotted Owl squeaking and chattering from near-by trees at night. But, being able to stand sunlight much better than the other owls, it hunts even at daytime. One of its pastimes is to sit quietly on telegraph wires waiting for its food to come almost to its door ! Four or five of these owls room together in tree holes or in ruined buildings.

There is another variety of owlet known as Chughad or Dandul, which is the same size as the Spotted Owlet. It is brown above and brownish white below, and has prominent white eyebrows. It also has raised feathers above the ears.

Owls do not build any nest themselves but lay in the abandoned nests of other birds like vultures and kites. Some owls lay eggs even in hollows on the ground or at the foot of trees. The clutch consists of two to five white eggs.

Owls do us no harm: in fact they are helpful to the peasants because they kill mice and squirrels. Yet we dislike owls, probably because they look so weird and their call is so unearthly. We think of it as a bird of gloom. There is a reference in *Macbeth* to the owl as a bird which foretells death and 'gives the sternest good-night'. But let us also remember that in many countries of the world, the owl is thought of as a bird of wisdom. The ancient city of Athens had the owl for its emblem, just as we in our country have the lion-head as our symbol. And do you know that in some parts of our country people imitate the owl's hooting at festive occasions like marriages ?

THE PARTRIDGE



The partridge is an earthbrown bird which lives in small shrubs instead of thick jungles. Because of its colour it is not easily spotted. Two varieties of it are commonly found in this country—the grey and the black. Both are really brown to look at; but the Grey Partridge has a mixture of grey and the Black Partridge has a dark back and black breast.

The Grey Teetar, as it is generally called, is a plump bird with deep brown blotches on the back and a stub tail of the same colour. Each feather of the upper plumage is crossed with a whitish band. Many of the feathers also have glossy shaft-like streaks. On the throat there is a reddish-brown patch marked by a dark outline. The male and the female are like.

The Black Partridge is much the same as the grey variety in build, but it is black-barred and has white and reddish yellow spots. The male has a patch of glistening white on the cheek and a chestnut collar round the neck.

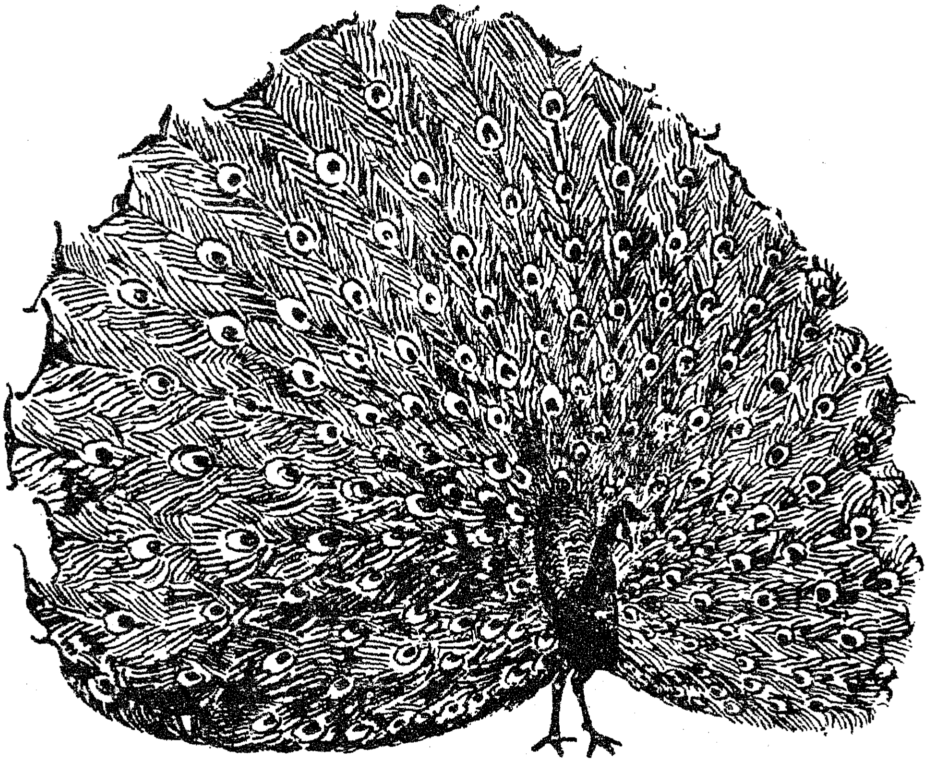
There is not much difference in the habits of these two kinds except that the black likes shrubs on river banks more than dry country. They both feed on grain, seeds, green shoots, ants, and insects of all types. They live in coveys of eight to ten and build their nests in hollows in the ground sheltered by grass and shrubs. They breed throughout the year, and the eggs are light brown in colour and six to nine in number. Like the chicks of the fowl, partridge chicks start running as soon as they come out of the egg. The parents are very fond of their young ones and keep company with them for a long time after their birth. Of the things they learn, the most useful is the art of dodging enemies.

Partridges are great fighters. Partridge-fights, like cock-fights, have been a popular pastime in our country. In old times there was hardly a town or village where partridge-fights were not arranged. Even now they are not uncommon. Partridges are kept in cages, but when tame they are often taken out for a stroll. The keeper walks in front with the cage, and the partridge follows him like a pet dog. It has a shrill call which sounds very much like "*patila*" "*patila*".

When a fight is arranged, the owners gather in some open field with their caged partridges. The cages are at first kept facing each other, to rouse the anger of the opponents. After a while the doors are opened and the partridges come out. They study each other for a while like wrestlers, and then begin to fight. They fight with great force, and seem bent on taking each other's life. When one of them is defeated and lies on the ground, the other walks about with a proud gait proclaiming its victory.

It is only the Grey Partridge that fights, not the black one.

The partridge is not on its wings for long. It flies for a while, then rests and flies again, but neither for a long time nor over a long distance. It uses its legs rather than wings for movement. It is a swift runner. Flying makes it tired too soon. As the saying goes, a partridge is caught after three flights.



THE PEACOCK

The peacock is the national bird of India. It is true that peacocks are found in some other countries also, but the Indian peacock is the grandest and most colourful of all. You know well in what a lordly way it struts giving rise to the simile 'proud as a peacock'. The Peacock is greatly valued in this country for another reason also. Lord Krishna in his boyhood wore its gorgeous feathers on his head and gave it a dignity which no other bird can aspire to have. In Southern India the peacock is regarded as the companion of Kumara, son of Lord Siva.

The peacock is found all over India except in some southern areas. But the place where it abounds is the region where Krishna was

born and spent his boyhood days, that is, 'Vraj,' which comprises the district of Mathura in Uttar Pradesh.

It is the male which is so splendid and not the female, the peahen. The peacock has a body which is about a metre long, and a train or tail which is some 1.2 metres in length. Its head feathers are short and curly. They are metallic-blue in colour on the crown and green at other places. The crest has fan-shaped tips. The neck is a shiny blue. The plumage is slaty-green above, green below, and grey above the tail. The long feathers of the tail are the real glory of the peacock. Each feather, which is of deep blue, ends in a half-moon or 'eye.' When the peacock raises its train, it takes the shape of a shield from which a thousand eyes seem to peer out. That is how in Sanskrit the peacock is referred to as the 'thousand-eyed' creature

The female is less beautiful though it has a crest like the male. The peahen is brownish, and has a short tail of dark brown. The male is fond of dancing in front of the peahens, showing off his many-coloured halo. The arrival of the monsoon is the great occasion for such display. Whether it is love or the promise of rain after the long hot summer that makes the peacock dance, there is little doubt that it dances and dances and dances. There is an old belief, however, that when a peacock dances, it looks at its feet, which are very ugly, and thus loses its enthusiasm and stops dancing.

The peacock is very shy by nature. Despite its long and colourful train, it is difficult to see the bird even when its call is heard. But it is easily tamed. When tamed, it runs up to the keeper, responding to his call, and accepts food from his hands without any fear. It feeds on grains, vegetable shoots, insects, lizards and even snakes, which are mortally afraid of it.

For all its beauty, the peacock does not have a pleasing call. It loves to live in thick bushes, especially on the banks of rivers or *jheels*. The hen lays its eggs in bushes, but occasionally on the roof of

abandoned houses also. The clutch consists of five to seven eggs which are ivory white or pale cream in colour. The breeding season is from June to August.

Peacocks move about in parties. In Rajasthan, where they are regarded as sacred and therefore go unharmed, the peacock parties sometimes consist of a hundred birds or more. There is one variety which is wholly white, but it is rare. It is found only in Assam forests.

The peacock like the parrot, was introduced into Europe, by Alexander the Great. Attempts were made in Iran about a thousand years ago to breed the Indian variety, but without success. Peacocks have been exported from India for many centuries. They were regarded as a great luxury at royal banquets in Europe. But in India people do not like the killing of peacocks. Emperor Asoka had forbidden his subjects to kill them.

You all know what a great lover of beauty the Moghul Emperor Shahjahan was. It was he who built the Taj Mahal. He was so fond of the prettiness of the peacock that he got his throne designed after it and called it the Peacock Throne. Crores of rupees were spent on it, as it was studded with some of the costliest sapphires, rubies, emeralds and diamonds in the world. It took seven years to make. One historian has described it in the following words: "The Peacock Throne was in the form of a bedstead on golden eagles. Its roof, enamelled inside and covered with jewels outside, was supported on twelve pillars of emerald and surmounted by the figures of two peacocks, ablaze with precious stones. Between the peacocks was a tree set with precious stones; three jewelled steps led to the emperor's seat." But alas! While the Taj Mahal stands, the Peacock Throne is gone. A raider called Nadir Shah took it away from Delhi when the Moghul power waned. In turn, it came into the hands of the East India Company. Plans were made to send it to England. But the ship which was carrying it to England sank in the sea. All attempts to recover it failed.

As the Koel is famous for its songs, so is the peacock for its dance, and it is proper that a book on Indian birds should begin with the Koel and end with the peacock. Rightly has it been said :

The children of this land of ours,
Sing and dance in glee,
When the peacock dances on the ground,
And the Koel sings on tree.

A HAPPY HOBBY

So we have read about beautiful birds and ugly birds, about gentle birds and cruel birds, about birds which sing and birds which have a grating voice, about birds which soar in the sky and others which prefer to hop about on land.

Like men, birds are bipeds, They have much else in common with us. There are many varieties of birds which are our close companions. There is hardly a house in which sparrows do not build a nest or which is not visited by crows and pigeons. This has been so since man learnt to build houses. That is why birds figure prominently in the legends and folk songs of every land, including India

Birds not only thrill us by their colour, song and grace of flight, but many of them are also useful to us in our daily life. Some of them no doubt, act as robbers in our fields and fruit gardens. But, as we have seen, they also help us by eating worms, insects and mice which would otherwise have destroyed our crops. Birds also form part of the food of man.

We speak of being bright as a 'bird' and 'free as a bird'. Although there are some shirkers like the koel. birds as a rule lead a very active life, They are alert every minute of their life. They take great care of their young ones. You must have seen how, when they find anything to eat, they fly back to their young ones and share it with them. Although they work hard to earn their food, they are not like the ants or bees, storing for the next day. In fact, many saints and singers have praised birds for this very quality.

Man has always envied one gift that the birds have—the gift of flight. His attempts to emulate the birds succeeded at last some sixty years ago. Althought men have not grown wings, they have invented flying machines and can now fly higher than any bird can.

One of the signs of a wise person is to know as much as possible about things around him. The study of trees and flowers, birds and

butterflies, is always a great source of joy. That is why bird-watching like flower-growing, has become a popular hobby. You, too, can have many happy moments by learning to identify more and more of our birds. By knowing more about them, you can know more of the wonders of life.